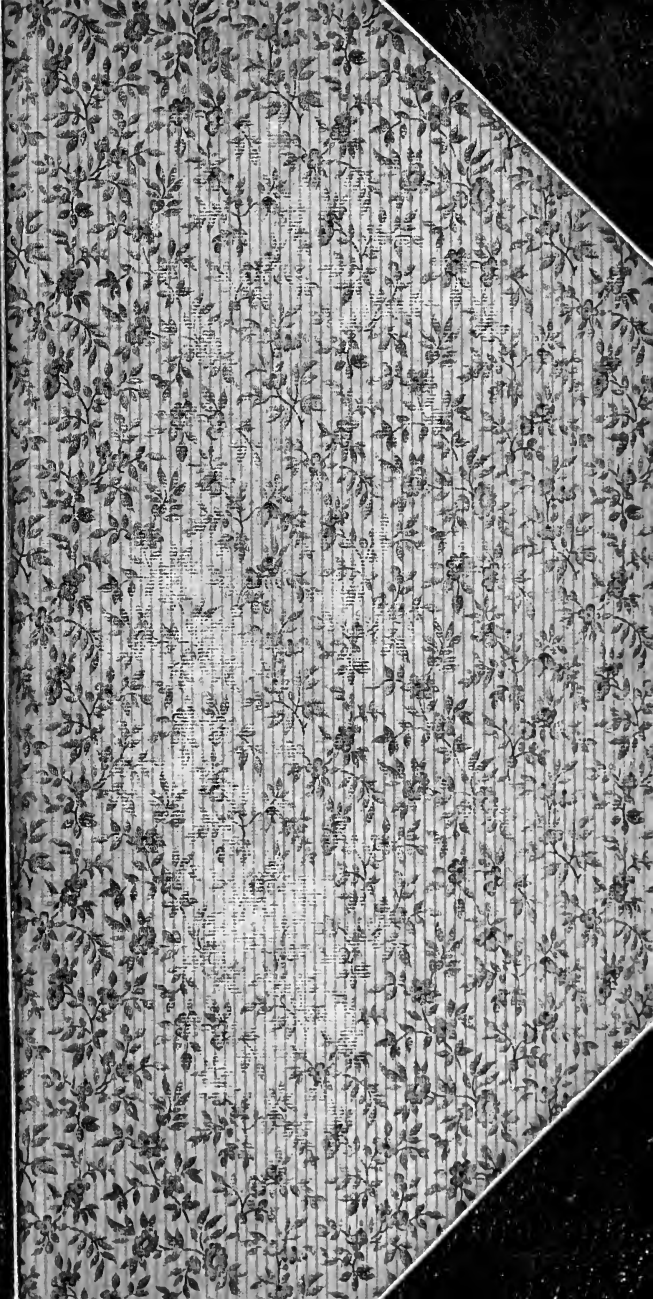


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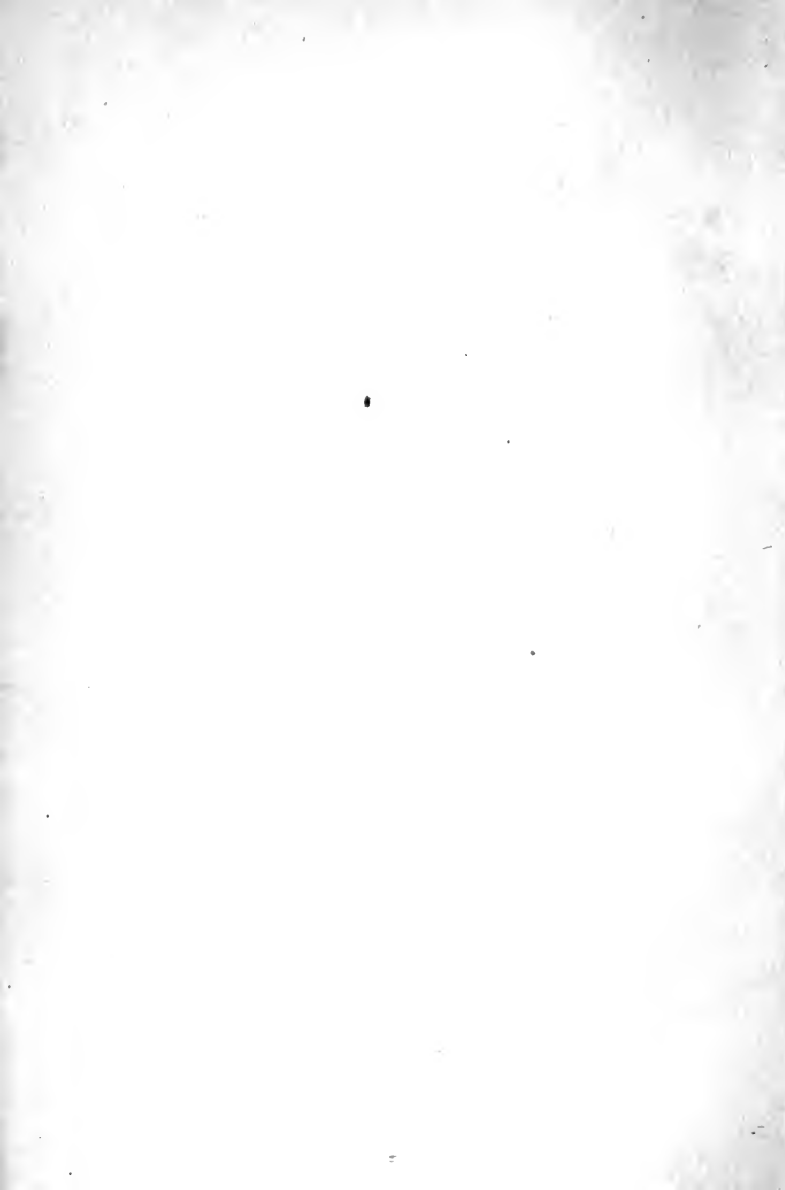
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THE REPENTANCE
OF
PAUL WENTWORTH.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

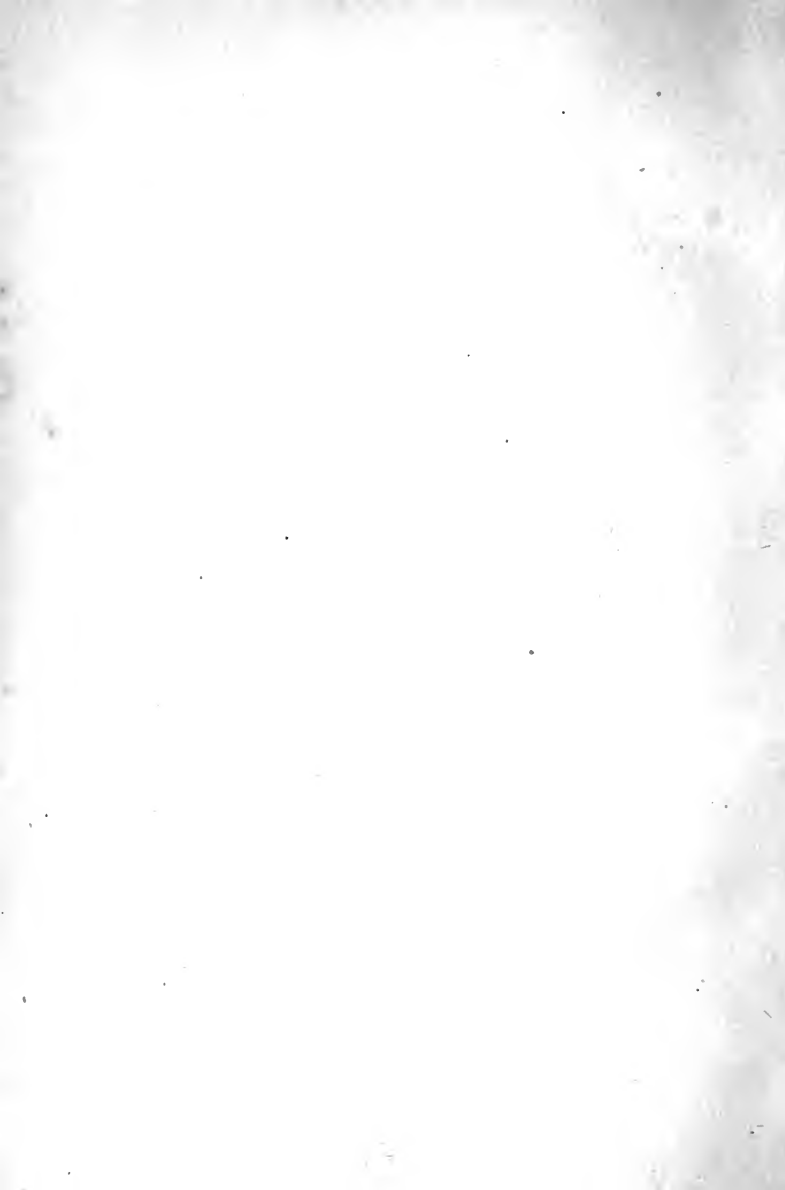
VOL. II.



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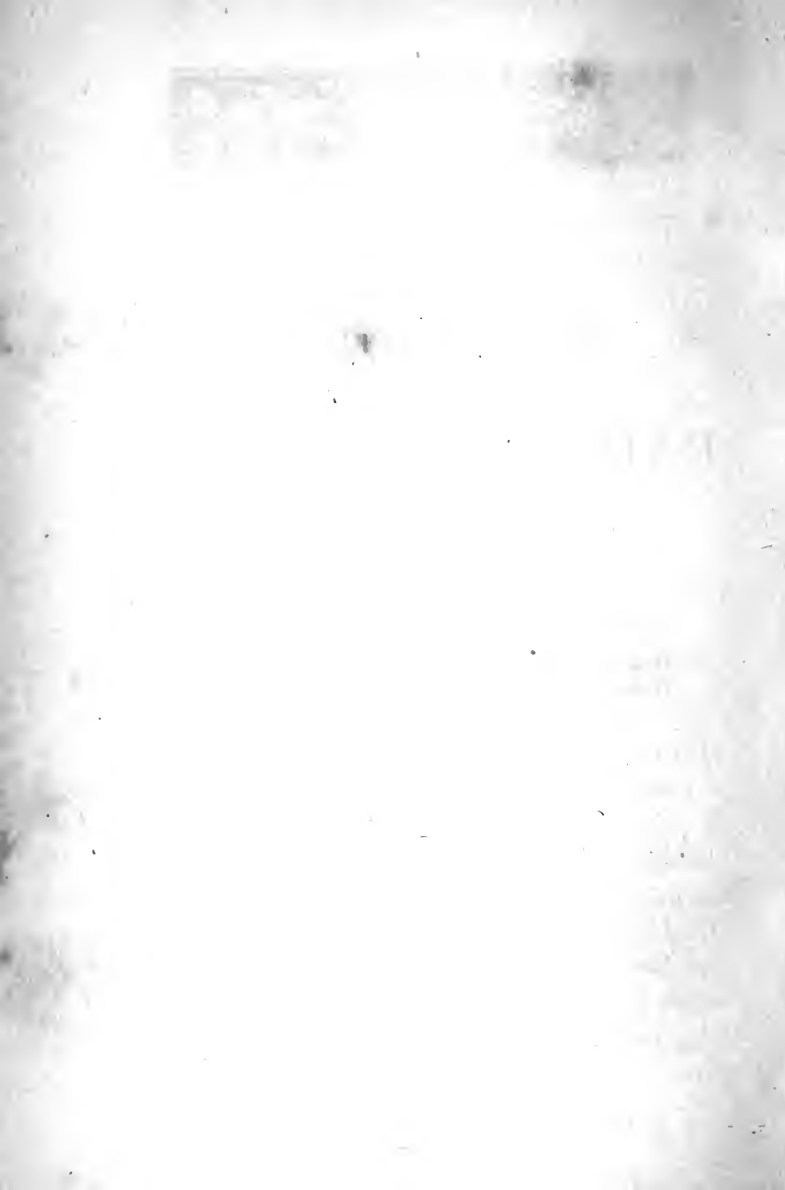
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“Men are led by strange ways. One should have tolerance for a man, hope of him; leave him to try yet what he will do.”—CARLYLE.



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THE REPENTANCE

OF

PAUL WENTWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

LADY CLAVERING TO THE RESCUE.

“Daughter, I know not what you call the highest. . . .
If this be high, what is it to be low?”

TENNYSON.

“I CAN’T think what made me fancy he was a widower,” poor Mrs. Erskine said, shivering as she spoke. She was standing with Lady Clavering in a secluded part of the garden on the morning following the latter’s arrival at the Hôtel Mythen; the air was chilly and autumnal, and, not expecting that the private conference to which her friend had invited her would last so long, the Professor’s wife had come out in her

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thin house-dress, unprotected by shawl or wrap of any kind, so her shivering condition was easily accounted for. "I certainly never thought he was a married man. What made me imagine he was a widower, I wonder? Surely Alec must have said something to that effect!"

"If you thought he was unmarried, Isabel," answered Lady Clavering briskly, "I should have said that was an additional reason for not letting a pretty young girl run about the country with him in this free-and-easy way. His being married—if he behaved himself as he ought to do, which he doesn't—would have been a kind of safeguard. But that's not really the question. Married or widowed, it makes no difference. With a reputation like his, half a dozen wives couldn't lessen the impropriety of Muriel's roaming about with him."

Lady Clavering did not shiver at all. She was well and warmly equipped for the journey on which she was about to start, and in any case the heat of her righteous zeal and indignation would have prevented her experiencing any sensation of cold.

"I am dreadfully sorry, Susan," Mrs. Erskine replied penitently. "I suppose I ought to have looked after her more closely, but Alec monopo-

lizes so much of my time that I have little left for any one else, and then he spoke so highly of Mr. Wentworth! I never had much to do with him myself, but I could see that he was a very clever, well-bred man, and I thought it very kind of him to take so much notice of a child like Muriel. So did Alec."

Lady Clavering gave a sort of despairing groan. "Isabel, I believe you are more than half a child still yourself," she said. "I speak plainly, but we have been almost like sisters all our lives, and I know you won't take my plain speaking ill. It's very nice to be as guileless and childlike and all that kind of thing as you and the dear Professor are, but it's very dangerous sometimes. Why, Muriel's nineteen; she's not a child at all. She's a very beautiful girl, just at the age to take the fancy of a jaded man of the world like Paul Wentworth. As to his good nature and kindness, it's a myth! You won't get *me* to believe in it. Of course he admires Muriel—who wouldn't? I don't blame him so much for that, and his own wife is a tiresome, cold-hearted, artificial woman: I detest her!—and I've no doubt he has gone as far as he dares in trying to flirt with the dear child. He dares a good deal, let me tell you. My great

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hope is that she's too young and simple to understand what he's been driving at."

"I am sorry you think so very badly of him," Mrs. Erskine said wistfully. "I have heard some very nice things about him from Alec and Muriel. One little story—of his marvellous kindness to some poor child who got lost between this place and Flüelen, and whom he saved from slipping over the precipice—was really quite touching."

"Worse and worse!" rejoined Lady Clavering, with another sound of dismay. "*Muriel* told you these pretty tales, did she? I am very sorry to hear it. However, they say we ought to give even Satan his due, and I don't wish to assert that Mr. Wentworth is destitute of common humanity. Indeed, I never heard that he was an unkind man."

"Then as regards Muriel," Mrs. Erskine struck in, eager to exculpate herself from the charges levelled at her, "don't you see that his age alone would prevent her looking upon him in—in the way you speak of? Oh, it's quite impossible that she should ever think of him in that way, Susan! Why, he must be old enough to be her father, pretty nearly! She would consider him an elderly man."

"My dear Isabel, how little you know about it all! A clever, fascinating man of Paul Wentworth's age would be much more likely to dazzle the mind of a romantic girl like Muriel than a curly-headed boy twenty years younger. His attentions would be something to be really proud of, you see. As to his being elderly, he's only forty and looks less; and, elderly or not, I never yet knew the woman whose head he couldn't manage to turn if he gave his mind to the undertaking."

"I have been very remiss, I fear," poor Mrs. Erskine murmured. Her mild blue eyes filled with tears; she looked the picture of helpless regret and utter bewilderment. "I believe I am unfit to take care of anybody, but to think that I should have acted such a careless part by poor Amy's child breaks my heart. Susan, you were always quick and full of resource. Tell me what to do in this terrible trouble!"

"Come, we needn't call it a terrible trouble at present," Lady Clavering said. She had gained the desired end now—Mrs. Erskine had been thoroughly frightened, and there was little fear but what she would prove a more circumspect guardian in future. "Perhaps there's no harm done. In fact, my impression is that there is

not. I got Muriel into my room this morning and talked to her—of course without saying anything of all this—and all she said reassured me. She seemed as gay as a lark and not a bit self-conscious, both good signs. Then I just casually mentioned young Arlingham—you know that nice young fellow at Eversleigh who paid her so much attention last summer—and she blushed like a rose at once. That was another good sign, and so, I thought, was her evident willingness to go back to England directly. No, I don't think there's any serious harm done yet."

"But what ought I to do now?"

"Do? Why, stop these *tête-à-tête* boating expeditions to begin with—they are the worst part of the business. I don't want to wound your feelings again, my dear, but how could you ever have permitted them? Well, there's no use crying over spilt milk. But it is lucky John and I were the people to see and recognize them last night, instead of some ill-natured strangers. She would have been terribly talked about in that case, I can assure you."

"I will not believe the world in general to be so gratuitously cruel," answered Mrs. Erskine, plucking up a little spirit. "I think you are rather harsh in your own judgments, Susan. I

may have been wrong in allowing the child so much liberty, but I gave the permission innocently, and she took it innocently; and for aught I know," added Mrs. Erskine, with a spurt of defiance, "Mr. Wentworth may have acted innocently in the matter too."

"A fig for Mr. Wentworth's innocence! You cannot know many men of his stamp, or you would not give much credence to that notion," Lady Clavering replied scornfully.

"No, I am glad to say I don't know many, or indeed any men of the stamp you would have me believe Mr. Wentworth belongs to," Mrs. Erskine retorted with growing heat.

"Have you believe!" Lady Clavering cried with a gesture of exasperation. "Why, the man's character is as well known as—as Cæsar Borgia's, I was going to say. Not that I mean to imply he's *like* Cæsar Borgia, of course. People say sometimes that his wife must be either a fool or an angel to bear as she does with him. I don't believe she's either myself, by the way: she's certainly not a fool, and I see no tokens of angelhood about her. I only know that if it was *my* husband who made himself so talked about, I should break my heart for shame and misery." Lady Clavering paused impres-

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sively, but a faint smile on her friend's lips warning her that the idea of the respectable, elderly Sir John enacting the part of a reckless and fascinating Don Juan was not without its humorous elements and suggestions, she hurried on again, "Well, Mrs. Wentworth's conduct has really nothing to do with the matter. If you want me to prove the truth of what I have been saying, I can tell you half a dozen stories——"

"No, no; pray don't!" interrupted Mrs. Erskine, flushing like a girl. "Of course I ought to have known that you would not speak without good and sufficient cause, Susan. But I would rather not hear these—stories."

"I do not want to repeat them, I am sure," Lady Clavering said. "They're not exactly edifying." This was undeniably true; nevertheless, Lady Clavering would have liked to repeat them very much. "We must think now what you ought to do about Muriel."

"Yes, certainly. Pray tell me what you would advise."

"First of all, I should inquire into this widower idea—I mean, I should try and find out how it reached you to begin with. If he's been wilfully deceiving the Professor and Muriel, I should expose him without mercy—to the girl

herself, that is to say. Of course you wouldn't talk about such a matter to strangers, or there would be a scandal at once. For my part, I believe Mr. Wentworth capable of anything, but I don't want to condemn him unheard. If you find that it was all your own mistake from beginning to end, of course you needn't say so much. In that case, your plan of action would be very simple indeed."

Lady Clavering, in her part of confidential counsellor and experienced woman of the world, was enjoying herself immensely. She stopped for a minute, partly to take breath and partly to indulge in a complacent review of the important position she conceived herself to be occupying at the moment, and then went on again as fast and as eagerly as before.

"In that case I should simply say that you have heard things about him from me and from John that you don't like—of course you won't enter into particulars, but you might just hint that he's not an estimable individual morally, and that he behaves ill to his wife; that will be quite enough for a girl like Muriel—and that, as you've heard these things, you think she had better not make such a friend of him, and rather keep out of his way in future. You will see by

the way she takes this whether he has really made any impression or not, because if he has, she'll try to stick up for him, and refuse to believe what you say. In any case, don't blame yourself to her for what is over and gone. Keep up your authority—perhaps you may need it before all's done with, though I repeat that I don't believe there's any real harm accomplished yet. But how lucky John and I came, for you are so innocent that there is no saying how long this kind of thing might have gone on before you woke up to its enormity! I wish I could stay and help you, but——”

“Susan, where are you? Where is Lady Clavering?” said Sir John's gruff voice close at hand. “The steamer is ready to start; we shall be late, as usual!”

“Coming, dear, coming,” cried his wife cheerfully. “Well, good-bye, Isabel”—embracing her friend; “write to me how it all falls out. I wish I could have stayed and helped you. Good-bye, and don't worry yourself.” And with this parting recommendation Lady Clavering sailed off, having previously done her very best, in all kindness, to harass Mrs. Erskine's gentle soul into a madness of perplexity.

That lady was indeed sorely distressed, but

with the removal of Lady Clavering's presence and the cessation of her energetic onslaughts in behalf of propriety and conventionality, the distress she had created began to subside a little. Susan, good soul! was always rather given to exaggerated alarm on slender provocation, and she had probably yielded to her habitual tendency in the present instance—indeed, had she not herself been obliged to confess that no harm had as yet been done? Mr. Wentworth might not be in all respects a model of virtue, but this regrettable fact would not render him incapable of showing disinterested kindness to a mere girl, young enough to be his daughter. Altogether, by the time she got back to the house and her husband, Mrs. Erskine had succeeded in bringing herself to a much more composed and hopeful frame of mind, and it was in such a frame that she sought counsel of the Professor.

He was not in an auspicious mood for giving counsel to any one on any subject whatsoever. Sir John's society had bored him insufferably, and he had had besides two or three dull but intricate business matters to dispose of that morning by letter, and had consequently been prevented attacking his dearly loved philosophers at the usual hour. When his wife detailed her

narrative he was at first inattentive, next a little taken aback, and finally exceedingly cross. "He wished Lady Clavering would keep her advice to herself: that chattering tongue of hers did no end of mischief. She never could appear on any scene without instantly causing an imbroglio. He hoped to goodness she had not been telling all this fine tale to Muriel—putting things into the child's head which she need never hear of, and was much better for not knowing?"

"No," Mrs. Erskine answered for her friend. "She has not done that, for she particularly assured me that she had not said a word to Muriel about the matter. She even warned me to be careful what I said myself."

"Much obliged for her warnings," muttered the Professor. "I should think we ought to know how to look after our niece without her help." The worthy man was all the more savage because in the inmost recesses of his heart he knew that the obnoxious Lady Clavering was right, and that he, Alexander Erskine, was wrong. "As to Wentworth, I always told you that I knew nothing of his private history. Lady Clavering's scandalous gossip may or may not be true; I have no means of testing its truth, and for that thank Heaven, say I! I don't

concern myself with such matters; I leave them to the society papers and the company in the servants' hall. Very possible Wentworth is not a Sir Galahad—or more properly a King Arthur; both are rare figures in modern society. But he is a perfect gentleman, and I decline to believe that he has taken advantage in any way of our confidence in him. If I thought he had," Mr. Erskine added, a sudden gleam of anger lighting up his rough-hewn features, "I would make him repent it bitterly! But I don't think it for a moment."

"That is just what I feel, just what I told Susan," rejoined his wife. "But you haven't given me any answer about the other point, Alec—about his having a wife living, I mean. Did you know it?"

"Know it? Of course I knew it!" the Professor retorted angrily. "You or Muriel, or both of you, ran away with some ridiculous idea about his being a widower when you first saw him, I believe, and I did not argue the matter with you, not feeling interested in the question. For aught I knew at that time your notion might have been correct. However, any doubts I entertained on the subject were soon set at rest by Wentworth's speaking voluntarily of his wife.

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He has mentioned her to me several times; he did so only last week, if I remember aright. Said something about her being in Scotland or Ireland, I forget which."

Mrs. Erskine breathed more freely. "I am very glad to hear this," she said. "It shows that there can have been no deception on his part, and that it does not do to trust implicitly to Susan's fancies. Yet I wonder how it happened that you never mentioned this to me, Alec?"

"Why on earth should I mention it to you?" inquired the Professor irritably. "Could I suppose that you were likely to feel profoundly interested in the fact of Mrs. Wentworth's being in Scotland—or in the fact of her existing at all? Have we been in the habit of discussing Wentworth's domestic affairs between ourselves, you and I?"

Mrs. Erskine was obliged to admit that such had certainly not been their habit. "Then you would have me do nothing—not move in the matter at all?" she asked timidly, laying a gentle hand on her husband's shoulder.

"I don't quite understand what you mean by moving in the matter," he answered more amiably. The mute caress had not been without its effect.

“Well—speaking to Muriel, and telling her she had better not go out with Mr. Wentworth any more.”

“As to that,” the Professor replied, getting up and looking about for his hat, “tell her what you please, Belle, my dear. I have perfect confidence in your judgment, whatever Lady Clavering may feel. I would only caution you against putting ideas into Thekla’s head that would never come there without help. For the rest, if even here we are to be subjected to periodical domiciliary visits from Mrs. Grundy and her satellites, perhaps you had better give the child a hint to avoid solitary expeditions with Wentworth in future. I believe he is going away in a day or two, which will simplify matters. Meanwhile, Muriel can easily excuse herself, if he asks her to walk or row with him; but she is not to be rude or give herself airs, remember.”

Mrs. Erskine laughed a little at the notion of Muriel’s being rude or giving herself airs to Mr. Wentworth. “I don’t think that is likely to happen,” she said. “Well, I will follow your advice exactly, Alec. I shall see by the way she receives my hint, whether——” She hesitated in confusion.

"Whether Wentworth's fascinations have had any effect, you mean?" her husband rejoined. "Stuff and nonsense! How should there be anything to see? The man's old enough to be her father." With which comforting reflection the Professor swung out of the room, calling as he went: "I am going for half an hour's stroll and smoke before we begin work."

His wife sat down to her writing-desk much relieved in mind. True, the task of conveying to Muriel a warning amounting to a prohibition still lay before her, and this task was very unpleasant to a woman of her shy, nervous temperament, but the conversation she had just held with her husband had shorn it of half its difficulties and disagreeables. Then, meek as she was, she nevertheless felt a glow of triumph steal over her as she reflected that after all she had been able to prove Susan's judgment over-harsh, and erroneous as well. She was not usually impulsive, but this unwonted feeling of exultation, this new pride of victory, carried her partially off her feet. She decided on sending a note to Lady Clavering by that very day's post.

She had written no further than "My dear Susan," when the door opened and her niece

came in. Muriel had not been out that morning, and her new happiness, coupled with her secret anticipation of the words that she was to hear from Wentworth's lips before many hours were over, made her restless. She found it hard to settle down to any kind of occupation, yet she was unwilling to go into the garden and so provoke the decisive interview just yet. Now that the fateful moment was close at hand she shrank a little from encountering it. Not that she had any lurking distrust of Wentworth's truth. She was very young and simple and inexperienced, and in her small world had never yet found special cause to doubt any one's sincerity; therefore it was not likely that she would doubt the man to whom she had given her whole heart. All her doubts related to her own unworthiness to be loved by him. But she felt a certain awe in contemplating the new phase of her life's history just ready to open before her, and a faint touch of innocent coquetry mingled with this maidenly timidity. "He asked me to come early," she said to herself, with a saucy smile born of pride and happiness unspeakable, "and it is a quarter past ten now. Well, that is early—very early, I think. I shall not go till eleven. You must wait a little while to-day,

Mr. Wentworth." And then she blushed deeply at her own unspoken audacity.

She had brought her drawing materials into the room with her, and, seating herself at the table in the window, she tried to steady her quivering fingers sufficiently to touch up a partially finished sketch. Mrs. Erskine, sitting at the Professor's writing-table on the opposite side of the room, had her back turned to her niece—a fact for which the poor lady felt devoutly thankful. Now that Muriel was actually present and the moment had clearly arrived for discharging what Mrs. Erskine felt to be an exceedingly painful duty, all her old nervousness returned upon her with redoubled force. She cast about for some easy introduction to the necessary subject of discourse.

"Do you know, Muriel," she said at length without turning round, "that I think I must be an extraordinarily dull person? I have just been talking to your uncle, and he was quite vexed with me for a stupid mistake I have been labouring under with regard to Mr. Wentworth. I always supposed he was a widower; but it seems that was pure fancy on my part, and that he has a wife living, who is travelling in Scotland or Ireland just now. Your uncle says Mr. Went-

worth has often spoken of her to him, but I am sure he never did to me."

Muriel sat stiffened into stone, staring straight before her in her dumb agony. The one instinct that animated her was to keep silence; she clenched her hands painfully in the effort to prevent herself crying out. It was as well that Mrs. Erskine did not turn round at that moment.

"One does leap to conclusions too hastily sometimes," Mrs. Erskine went on; while Muriel's heart suddenly awoke from the trance in which it had seemed to stand still, and beat so wildly that she felt as if great hammers were clanging in her ears and brain, while everything before her whirled round in a giddy dance, and, though she still heard her aunt's voice speaking, it seemed to come to her from an ever-increasing distance, until at last she had to strain every nerve to catch what was said. "I believe you leapt to this conclusion too, my dear, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," Muriel answered. Her own voice sounded far away to her, too, and she was so cold that she trembled from head to foot.

"So did your uncle, though he scarcely likes to admit as much now."

Muriel rose from her chair and seemed as if she were going to speak. For a moment her

heart cried out in wild revolt, "It is not true ! It cannot be true ! I will not believe it !" But before the words could reach her lips, she sank down again. *She knew it was true.* In a moment of time her preternaturally excited memory had retraced the history of the last three weeks, recalling all that had perplexed her, and she knew that her aunt's words gave the key to the whole mystery. All was fully explained now ; the answer to the riddle was found. Like a flash of lightning in a dark and unexplored region, Mrs. Erskine's announcement revealed to Muriel over what manner of ground she had been treading so unsuspectingly. There was no hope : it was all true. One thing only was left for her to do now—to try and conceal the crushing shame that had overtaken her. "No one shall know, no one shall know—if I die for it !" she said to herself. She got up and moved her drawing-board a little, so as to bring her face into deeper shadow.

Mrs. Erskine's pen continued to fly busily over the paper. "Did Mr. Wentworth ever talk to you about his wife ?" she inquired with innocent craftiness, nerving herself for the coming plunge.

"No, never."

"Ah, well ! there may have been a reason for

his silence. Lady Clavering knows a great deal about him, and I am sorry to say she tells me he is not at all a good man. He seems to be sadly destitute of moral principle, and he is said to behave very ill towards his wife; in fact, I fear he is a very bad husband," said poor Mrs. Erskine, dutifully repeating her lesson. "So you see, dear, he is hardly the person you should make a friend of. I know he has been very kind to you, and of course you would not like to appear ungrateful. Still your uncle and I think you had better not go out alone boating with him again, and you can easily make some polite excuse if he asks you, cannot you?"

"Quite easily," Muriel answered with a little laugh. "I wonder if I am going mad?" she said to herself. She seemed to have a double identity; she heard herself speaking, and listened as if to a third person. "As you say, Aunt Isabel, he has been very good-natured, and I should not wish to seem rude."

"Very right, dear," returned Mrs. Erskine approvingly. The dreaded ordeal was passing off infinitely better than she could have ventured to hope. "I know your uncle would be pleased to hear you say that."

"In any case," Muriel went on, playing her

part with growing assurance and watching herself play it with a kind of insane admiration, "I shan't need to make many excuses, because he—Mr. Wentworth—he told me himself he was going back to England to-morrow."

"Perhaps that is as well," returned her aunt. "Drawing off in any way from a person who has been kind to you is always disagreeable work. I was sorry to hear so unfavourable a report of Mr. Wentworth's character, for I rather liked him myself, and your uncle thought very highly of his abilities. However, unfortunately, talent and principle very frequently don't go together."

Muriel assented vaguely to this rather trite sentiment. Then, remembering that she was hardly acting fully up to the *rôle* she had assumed, she added firmly, "He is certainly a very clever man, and talks exceedingly well. It is a pity he should be on such bad terms with his wife. Perhaps she may be partly in fault."

"No, I am afraid his wife has excellent reason for being on bad terms with him," Mrs. Erskine answered gravely. "Hush! there's your uncle coming. Don't say a word more about Mr. Wentworth before him, dear; he's—he's not quite himself this morning" (thus did the faith-

ful wife describe her learned lord's uncompromising fit of ill temper), "and he got rather annoyed talking about this affair. So not a syllable on that subject, please."

Not much need for Mrs. Erskine's final entreaty. To save her life, Muriel could not have uttered another coherent word, and, but for the Professor's timely appearance, she must have betrayed herself in a minute more. His entry gave her respite from the necessity of speech, and she had still strength left to command herself in silence. What she would have given at that moment to be able to leave the room, to get away somewhere into darkness and loneliness with her torturing secret, Heaven only knows. The instinct common to all wounded creatures, the instinct to creep away and hide in solitude, was strong upon her. But she dared not move. She must play her part, she repeated to herself—she must play her part; it was all that was left her now. She must not even think, lest she should betray herself; she must go on with what she was doing.

So the Professor sat down to his manuscripts, with his wife beside him holding a book of reference in her hand; and Muriel remained in the window and went on touching up her sketch.

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After a while she found that the white paper dazzled her eyes, and the dark lines upon it formed themselves into bewildering knots and circles which moved about the page, and her pencil went everywhere except in the right direction; so she no longer attempted to draw, but set herself to grind colours—those very colours which Wentworth sent her from Grindelwald. In the midst of her occupation she noticed that the wind had risen higher till it threatened to become a gale; a shower had come up before it, and the big raindrops as they fell were splashing in at the open window. She got up and closed it with a steady hand, and went back to her colour-grinding again.

Time passed. Half an hour by the clock on the chimney-piece, half a century to the girl stretched on the rack of suppressed anguish. Finally Mrs. Erskine, who had been watching the Professor's face for some minutes, rose and glided across the room in her noiseless way to Muriel's side.

"Dear," she said in an almost inaudible whisper, "I think the noise of that grinding annoys your uncle. Would you mind taking it into the *salon*—or into your own room, if you prefer that? I am afraid it is too wet for you to go out."

The moment of release, so long looked for, had come at last. Strangling the sob of relief that rose in her throat, Muriel gathered up her belongings with deliberate calm, and left the room in her customary quiet fashion—she walked even a little slower than usual. On the stairs, indeed, her self-command did threaten to desert her, for the dizziness and blindness which had returned upon her as soon as she began to move made her stumble once or twice, and obliged her to cling to the balusters to save herself from falling. But she gained her own door safely, went in, and turned the key behind her; then she sank down in a corner of the window-seat, and let her head fall upon her hands. Just at that moment the little cuckoo clock on the wall above struck eleven, and she uttered a low stifled sound, something between a moan and a laugh, as she heard it. It was the hour at which she was to have gone to meet Wentworth.





CHAPTER II.

“TOTAL ECLIPSE.”

“But a day,
And the world is changed!”

R. BROWNING.

“You will probably fall lower than others who never aspired to climb so high.”

All through the long terrible hours of that miserable day did Lucy's light mocking words continue to haunt Muriel, sounding like a disregarded prophecy of the bitter humiliation that was to come upon her. She walked up and down the carpetless floor of her narrow little bedroom, repeating the sentence to herself; she buried her face in her hands as she knelt by the window, and it rang persistently through her brain. Ah, well! she had fallen low enough now. She writhed under the sense of her own intolerable, matchless disgrace, every recollection of the past month and its history adding to the

burning sense of shame. Shame possessed her, scorched her, withered her to the soul. It left as yet scarce room in her for any other feeling, none at all for pain, and little even for indignation, except it were indignation against herself and her folly, and her unmaidenly readiness to respond to Wentworth's doubtful wooing by making confession of love to a man who had never asked her to be his wife. She could not stay to think now of the ruined fabric of her happiness, or of the shattering of her faith in the man whom she had trusted so utterly; still less would she stoop to mourn over the hopeless destitution to which a few words had reduced her who on that very morning had felt herself passing rich in the assured possession of Wentworth's love. Such love was a cheat, an insult, a deadly humiliation—it was not likely that she would cry out for the loss of that. But to undo the past; to take back those words and looks which it maddened her with shame to recollect; or, since that was impossible, to force Wentworth to put a new interpretation upon them—she would have flinched from no ordeal whereby she might have accomplished something of all this. A wild idea even crossed her brain of going forth, with the newly discovered truth on her lips, to

meet the man who had deceived her, of greeting him unconcernedly, and then proceeding to rally him lightly on having kept her so long ignorant of his domestic circumstances. "Why did you never tell me anything of your wife before, Mr. Wentworth?" she seemed to hear herself saying. "It was very unfriendly of you; it would have interested me so much to hear all about her." But she recognized that the plan was an insane one—and even worse, utterly futile. Things had gone too far between her and Wentworth for any such poor flimsy pretence of indifference to be of the smallest retrospective avail. No, there was nothing she could do to regain her place, even partially, in her own respect or in his. She could hold aloof from him, and so be preserved from further humiliation, but that was all that lay in her power now.

It was easy enough to hold aloof all through the morning and afternoon. The Erskines took their *déjeuner* upstairs, as they almost invariably did now, and no inquiries were made for Muriel, so that she was not obliged to leave the shelter of her own room; but when the shadows began to lengthen, she felt that she could remain there no longer without arousing some kind of suspicion that all was not well with her. This she

dreaded above all things, for she was determined at any cost to keep her wretched secret to herself. No one should pity her, no one should cross-question her, no one should wax indignant on her behalf. She would continue to play her part, and to play it bravely.

She made very careful preparations for playing it, even to putting on one of her prettiest gowns. She wished to present as bright an appearance as possible, and if her lips and cheeks would remain abnormally white in spite of all her courageous endeavours to look “just as usual,” why, she must make up for the absence of colour in her face by diverting attention to her attire. A pitiful, girlish little device, this, but one which showed a brave spirit, nevertheless.

When at length she actually went down, she found that she had not quitted her refuge a moment too soon, for the Professor had despatched his letters, and had just found leisure to marvel where his niece could be. He seemed inclined to be unusually talkative over his afternoon coffee, fortunately, so Muriel had only to play the part of an attentive listener. This was fairly easy at first, but after a while, as Mr. Erskine went on to discourse unweariedly of

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all things in heaven and earth, the strain of keeping her mind fixed on the subjects of his discourse became cruelly great. It was often a difficult matter to get the Professor to talk at all, but when once started, he was simply merciless as a conversationalist; and now the interminable stream of words flowed on and on, until even the devoted Isabel was thankful when her husband proposed employing the remaining hour before dinner in looking over a parcel of new books which had been sent him to review.

He had not glanced through ten pages in the first volume he opened, before he looked up with a muttered exclamation of impatience. "This fellow to prate about the dialectic of the schoolmen!" he said indignantly. "Why, he does not understand the rudiments of the science he attempts to criticize; he misrepresents Aquinas at every turn. He misquotes him too—but there I have him! I have the treatise he affects to quote from with me: where is it, Belle? A small quarto volume in a very worn brown binding."

"You left it in the *salon* last night when you went out to smoke with Sir John Clavering," answered Mrs. Erskine. "I meant to have brought it upstairs with me, but I forgot. Just

run down and fetch it, please, dear Muriel. It was on the ledge of the bookcase when I saw it last.”

Muriel rose obediently and left the room without the slightest demur, but outside the door she halted, pale and trembling. Was there no mercy for her? she cried out inwardly; when she was trying so hard to avoid seeing the man she knew it was her duty never to see again if she could help it, was she to be forced into meeting him through no fault of her own? True, there was one way in which she might have secured herself against this contingency, and that was by telling her uncle and aunt the whole story of the last three weeks. But her pride would not suffer her to do this, and perhaps it was hardly to be expected that it should. Professor and Mrs. Erskine were her near relatives indeed, but she knew comparatively little of them, and they were not either of them calculated to attract the confidence of a shy, proud, sensitive girl suddenly plunged into a heart-rending trouble which overwhelmed her with as much shame as grief. In a very real sense they were and would always remain strangers to her. No, she had only herself to take counsel with, and she decided that she must go forward, since to show her anxiety

to avoid meeting Wentworth would be to betray her secret at once.

Downstairs, therefore, Muriel went, pausing nervously before she crossed the hall to see if a tall figure in a dark shooting-coat might be discerned leaning in the doorway, or pacing the walk outside. But no one was to be seen, though the door itself stood wide open, and a sharp gust of wind whistled past Muriel, blowing some yellow autumn leaves, the first that had fallen from the neighbouring trees, into fantastic circles on the grey stone floor. She breathed a little more freely as she turned into the *salon* itself and went straight across it to the book-case, looking neither to the right nor left, bent only on fulfilling her errand as quickly as might be. But she was not to escape so easily. As she laid her hand upon the coveted volume, she heard the rustle of a newspaper hastily thrown down; and from a low chair where he had been sitting concealed by the piano, Wentworth rose and came eagerly forward.

Muriel knew then that the decisive moment had come. Flight was impossible: she could only steel her heart desperately against him. She snatched her eyes from his face and bent them resolutely on the book she held, closing her

fingers upon it, too, with the tenacity of a vice—and so stood motionless before him. Some men would have been disconcerted by such a reception, but it was rather difficult to arrest Paul Wentworth in his present mood.

“Child,” he said, laying his hand a little heavily on Muriel’s cold, unresponsive one, “why have you kept me waiting so long? Did you forget that I asked you to come to me early, and that I am going away to-morrow?”

It had been easy to view Wentworth in his true colours and to harden herself against him when he was not by; but it was not so easy now. Muriel nerved herself afresh for the ordeal: if she could not help hearing, at least she would not see him. So she kept her eyes still cast down while she answered quietly, “No, I had not forgotten.”

Wentworth loosed his hold and fell back a step or two, with a dull, indefinable fear clutching at his heart-strings. A terrible foreboding of the truth was upon him, but he would not give place to it.

“You have acted very unlike yourself, then,” he rejoined with deep displeasure in his tone, “and you have surprised and—and hurt me more than I care to tell you. It is well, how-

ever, that you are come now. If the matter of which I have to speak is a light one to you, it is nevertheless profoundly interesting to *me*. Come out with me for a little while, that we may be able to talk quietly."

She became as white as ashes and the hands which grasped the book shook like aspens; but her voice was firm. "I am sorry," she said, "but that is quite impossible."

Never in her life before had Muriel Ferrars spoken to Paul Wentworth in that tone. He knew the worst now; he knew that his confession came a day too late.

She moved as if to leave him, but he detained her. "Since you cannot go out," he said, curbing himself by a mighty effort and speaking very gently, "stay here for a few minutes. I will not keep you longer than is absolutely necessary."

"I am sorry," Muriel repeated, but less firmly this time—Wentworth's extreme gentleness of manner had touched her to the quick—"but I cannot stay."

"Have you been forbidden to speak to me?" Wentworth asked, with a flash in his eyes which betrayed the fury of the storm raging beneath the calm exterior he preserved.

For the first time Muriel lifted her head and

looked him full in the face with sad, indignant eyes. "No," she answered ; "since no one knows any reason why I ought not to speak to you."

There was scorn in her voice, for she thought that he had put his question in order to find out if she had betrayed him to the Professor. Nothing was in truth farther from his thoughts ; he had not given even a passing consideration as to what any other beside Muriel herself might think of him. The look of bewildered pain with which he heard her contemptuous intonation told her plainly that on this point at least she had misjudged him, and the words had scarcely crossed her lips before she regretted them.

"You have mistaken my question," Wentworth said, still gently, "but let that pass. Since you expose yourself to no danger of reproof by staying, you can surely stay this once. I ask only to be heard, Muriel ; I have a right to be heard. Give me five minutes in which to tell you my story."

His voice, in its pathos and reproachful tenderness, would have moved the stoniest heart—how it wrung Muriel's there is little need to say. It compelled her as it were to look at him again, and his face, she found, pleaded for him with like eloquence ; there was no ignoring the deep

suffering written in every line. Yet she had still strength left to resist the double appeal.

"I think I have heard already," she answered, "all that it is necessary for me to know. I will go now, please."

If she expected a wild outburst of passionate entreaty and protestation in reply to these words of hers—and perhaps she did expect something of the kind—her expectations were not fulfilled. Wentworth made no attempt to press her further.

"As you will," he acquiesced, moving a little so as to leave her free to pass on; "so be it. Perhaps you are right and we had better say nothing." He walked deliberately over to the door and opened it for her. "I suppose you will not refuse to say good-bye to me?"

Muriel turned and faced him with the air of an insulted princess, still holding her hands clasped round the book lest he should touch them. Her slight figure seemed to dilate, and her pale young face wore a look of pride and bitterness which aged it by ten years. In that supreme instant of her life the last lingering vestige of unconscious childhood faded from her countenance, and she stood before Wentworth full-grown in womanhood, a woman deeply grieved and wronged.

“Mr. Wentworth,” she said slowly, and her clear unwavering tones cut him like a knife, “I am glad you see that there is nothing more to say. I mean to forget everything, myself. Good-bye; I hope you will have a pleasant journey, and find Mrs. Wentworth and your children well.” Like a young queen she bent her head in formal salutation as she passed him, and went out and on upstairs without pause or falter.

That same evening Mrs. Erskine showed her husband the note she had written to Lady Clavering. “You were in the right throughout, Alec,” she said; “I have told Susan so. Muriel does not concern herself in the least about Mr. Wentworth or his affairs, so evidently he has only behaved to her as any fatherly friend might do.”

“Right?” echoed the Professor, now thoroughly restored to good humour. “Of course I was right. Lady Clavering’s idea was preposterous; if she was not such an old and staunch friend of yours, I should say it was insulting as well. You see, my dear Belle, you did well to support the opinion of your dull old bookworm of a husband, even against that of an accomplished woman of the world!”



CHAPTER III.

A PASSAGE PERILOUS.

“Go from me. Yet I know that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow.”

E. B. BROWNING.

Two days later.

It was a fair sunshiny afternoon following upon forty-eight hours of almost incessant wind and rain, and Muriel sat by the window of the Erskines' sitting-room, looking listlessly out at the beautiful panorama from which all beauty seemed to her sad young eyes to have suddenly faded. She was not alone. Her uncle and aunt were both in the room, and the floor was strewn with books and manuscripts which Mrs. Erskine was packing under her husband's direction, for on the morrow the whole party was to set off for Italy.

“This ought to have some silver paper round it,” Mrs. Erskine remarked, holding up a dainty

little copy of Plato's "Republic" bound in white vellum.

"Don't trouble yourself about that," answered the Professor, who stood by with a cigarette in his mouth. "It will do very well, my dear; just stick it into that corner of the case."

"Yes, and find it again at Como with all the edges rubbed; just what you like to see, Herr Professor!" retorted his wife playfully. "Will you guarantee me against your natural wrath under such circumstances? I trow not. No, thank you; I prefer going to look for some paper now." She rose from her knees as she spoke, and went out of the room on her errand.

The Professor sauntered over to the window, and stood drumming his fingers on the pane and humming an old Scotch air considerably out of tune. Presently he turned his head and addressed his niece. "Looks well for our journey to-morrow, does it not, little one?" he said cheerfully.

No answer. Lost in her own bitter thoughts, and for a moment off her guard, Muriel had not heard her uncle speak, had not even noticed his approach.

"Are you dreaming, Thekla?"

She gave a great start, and the colour rushed

into her pale cheeks for an instant. "I beg your pardon, Uncle Alec, but I did not hear what you said."

"That was very evident," the Professor responded, not unkindly. "You were plainly a thousand miles away. 'When pensive I thought of my love,' eh, little girl?" he added, with a good-natured attempt at a fatherly joke. "Well, don't think of him too much, whoever he may be, or we shall have you losing all your roses. Now I think of it, you are looking rather pale at this moment; are you quite well?"

"Oh yes; I am very well indeed, thank you."

"H'm—you don't look it," Mr. Erskine returned doubtfully. "I cannot quite make out what is amiss, but you certainly do not look altogether yourself. Ah! you have been shut up in the house for the last day or two, I remember; I dare say you are pining for fresh air. Why don't you go out for a stroll this lovely day? To be sure, walking alone is dull work; I am afraid you must often find life here a dull business altogether, my dear. I am sorry for your sake that our friend Wentworth is gone. Though he is hardly of an age to be your companion, a chat with him was better than nothing—and he is a good talker."

Muriel had early taught herself to receive the mention of Wentworth's name, and even to utter it, with composure. "I am not at all dull, I assure you," she answered; "and Mr. Wentworth was not always an amusing companion by any means. He is a man of moods, never twice alike."

The Professor faced suddenly round and laid his hand on the girl's shoulder. "I don't think you seem to like Wentworth as well as you used to do," he said a little sharply. "Is there any special reason for your change of opinion?"

Muriel was prepared, she thought, for any cross-examination to which she might be subjected, but she was not prepared to face her uncle's unexpected scrutiny. Do what she would, she could not hinder the swift blanching of her face under the Professor's inquiring gaze, but her voice was steady as she replied, "Perhaps I don't like him quite so well as I did when I first knew him. I think some things Aunt Isabel said may have prejudiced me against him a little." She spoke slowly, as if considering the subject.

"Humph!" was the sole reply vouchsafed by the Professor as he released her. He felt sure that her sudden pallor betokened some feeling deeper than mere disapprobation, but he would

not question her further. In such a case, silence was the best and safest remedy. If, as he suspected, Wentworth's brilliancy had so far captivated the girl's fancy as to cause her to miss him unduly now that he was gone, and to reproach herself for so doing, the less said in future about him and his characteristic qualities the better.

The Professor was a loyal soul, hiding a rare refinement of feeling under his outer husk of roughness and unsociability, and never even to his wife did he reveal his knowledge of the secret of which he had accidentally obtained a glimpse. Muriel herself was not sure whether he had guessed anything or not, since he never again recurred to the subject; and her thoughts for a long time subsequently were so engrossed by one idea, that she scarcely noticed the marked increase of kindness in her uncle's manner towards herself, or the delicate tact with which he systematically avoided all reference to Wentworth's name and to his stay in their midst.

On the whole, Muriel felt that she had come out of this first ordeal pretty fairly. Anxious to impress the Professor still further with a sense of her undisturbed calm, and at the same time to show her readiness to comply with his suggestions, she rose as her aunt returned to the

room, and announced her intention of going out. "It was so very fine that it seemed a pity to stay in the house."

This was quite true; still, she would really have preferred staying there. Her old pleasant haunts out of doors were so full of ineffaceable memories, all associated with one figure, one presence, one voice, that the pain of visiting them now was almost more than she could endure. Yet she had come deliberately out to face this pain. It was part of the burden she had set herself to carry, and she was determined to carry it unflinchingly, let the effort to do so cost her what it might. Nevertheless, the reflection that this burden would be hers to carry in perpetuity weighed upon her with a sense of intolerable oppression. When the time came for her to go home—and she longed for this time to arrive, hoping that change of scene and return to those surroundings amidst which she had spent nineteen years of unclouded happiness might avail to soothe the terrible aching at her heart—she would still have to play a part: to Lucy, to her brother, to Jack Arlingham, to every one who loved her, in short, lest they should discover her shameful grief. If she had had a right to grieve, half the poignancy of her

trouble would have been removed; or if it had been possible for her to look back upon the chief actor in the miserable little drama with feelings of contempt and indignation merely, it would have been comparatively easy to hide what had passed. But this was sadly out of the question. Muriel's love for Wentworth, as she found to her cost, had been a love for him personally, over and above her worship of him as an ideally perfect character; not only was her faith shattered and her pride wounded to the death, but her heart was broken as well. And then came a whisper, "Guilty as he was, did not he too suffer?" and a vast pity filled her in thinking of his face as she had seen it last—white with silent suffering, eloquent in mute appeal to which she had refused to return any answer. Perhaps—who knows?—she half repented her refusal already. Certainly the memory of that look pursued her continually, keeping her sleepless through the long watches of the night, and haunting her even on her knees.

She did not walk far that beautiful autumn afternoon. She was tired—she generally felt more or less tired now—and after a very few minutes she went and sat down under a spread-

ing chestnut tree, the very same tree in the shade of which Wentworth had given her her first drawing-lesson on the morning after the adventure that led to their acquaintance. The deep golden sunshine flickered between the leaves and touched her bare head (for she had taken off her hat and thrown it down beside her) with a kind of healing warmth. From a child Muriel had always loved the sun, and delighted to bask in its rays; and to-day they fell upon her with caressing softness, like the warm touch of a friendly hand. She had not wept since the day when she had parted with Wentworth in scorn and enmity, but now, as she leant her weary head against the gnarled trunk of the tree, a few heavy tears gathered and dropped down silently. Only a few, but they relieved the dull numbing pain in brain and heart; and if life did not look less sad after they were shed, it looked at least less pitilessly cruel. If her old belief in human nature did not return to her, her trust in something higher did, and, after all the storm and stress of the three bygone days, a sort of hush was upon her tempest-tossed spirit. Physically, too, she was wearied out, for she had scarcely closed her eyes during the previous night, night being the time when natural feeling revenged

itself unmercifully for the constraint put upon it by day; and gradually a kind of lassitude crept over her, till body and mind alike yielded to its soothing influence, and she sank into sleep. She slept tranquilly, much like a tired child, while the breeze from the lake ruffled her uncovered hair about her forehead, and the dancing leaves above cast a moving tracery of light and shadow on her face. She looked very young, so sleeping; pathetically young in the eyes of one who came rapidly over the grass towards her as he caught sight of her figure under the tree, and then stopped suddenly short, checking the exclamation that rose to his lips, as he perceived her to be unconscious of his approach.

Paul Wentworth stood looking down at Muriel Ferrars. He marked the attitude of intense weariness, the colourless cheeks with the heavy dark lashes resting upon them wet with recent tears, even the forlorn droop of the little hands fallen listlessly apart—and he knew all he saw for his own work. His conscience might indeed be blunted, but his heart was not yet hardened to such a sight; and as he looked, remorseful tenderness filled his eyes. Now that it was too late, he would have endured anything to unmake the history of the last month!

Wentworth's step had been almost noiseless, and he stood at Muriel's side so rigidly motionless that he scarcely appeared to breathe ; yet the consciousness of his presence seemed to penetrate her sleep-beclouded brain in some mysterious manner. She stirred and opened her eyes, but before she had opened them she knew quite well on whom their first glance would be certain to fall. There was scarcely even an inflection of surprise in her tone as she said, rising meanwhile hastily to her feet, "It is you, Mr. Wentworth !"

"Yes, it is I," Wentworth answered in a low, firm voice which had somehow a suggestion of suppressed determination in its subdued tone. He did not attempt to greet Muriel in any conventional fashion, to come a step nearer, or to take her hand ; he simply stood and looked at her with a fixed, unwavering gaze.

His look shattered the composure she was trying to assume. "How is it——? I thought you were gone," she said brokenly.

"I did go," Wentworth replied, still with the same manner, which can only be described as overpoweringly quiet. "I have been two days at Engelberg. Now I have come back only for an hour—to see you."

Muriel put up her hand as if to ward off a blow. "I told you the other day I had heard everything," she said appealingly; "you knew there was nothing further to be said. You said so yourself, then."

"True," Wentworth assented with a touch of sarcasm. "I did say so . . . then."

The veiled mockery of his tone roused all Muriel's pride. She looked him full in the face, and her grey eyes flashed indignantly. "Perhaps you always meant to come back?" Her voice was as indignant as her eyes.

"Yes," he returned defiantly, "I always did mean it. I told you from the first that I demanded to be heard, and that I had a right to be heard. You saw fit to deny me that right. Very well. I chose to yield to you at the time, but with the intention of claiming my right again at the earliest opportunity. I have come to claim it now."

"What right can there be?" asked Muriel, bewildered by this sudden masterful vehemence. "I ought not to listen; and it is no use, no use! Why did you come back?"

"Why?" Wentworth questioned with rising passion. "Because you are the one human creature for whose good opinion I care a jot, or whose

scorn and hatred would give me a moment's pain. Because I could not endure to live and have you believe, as you will be taught to believe, that I planned deliberately to deceive you. Because I will not suffer you to be persuaded that my love for you—love such as you, half child as you are, can neither fathom nor understand—was a shameful cheat!”

He was deathly pale, and his deep-set eyes were full of a strange fire, but his voice, in spite of the passion in it, was still subdued; there were no loud tones, no violent gestures. He remained quite immovable, leaning one shoulder against the bole of a tall fir that grew close by; and with a sudden incongruous flash of admiration it struck Muriel how commanding he looked. “Will you hear me now?” he asked more gently after a moment.

Muriel looked around her almost wildly in her perplexity. “I cannot tell if I ought to listen,” she said distractedly. “I must not, I dare not——”

“You dare not?” he interrupted, his death-like pallor suddenly giving way to a dark angry flush. “Have you learnt already to look upon me with such dread and abhorrence that you are afraid to hear me speak? Oh, I am no

saint, that is very certain! Perhaps your kind friend informed you of the righteous horror in which my name is held by certain people of superfine morals? No? Well, I have furnished you with another fact to set down in your indictment against me. Only in your case—others may think what they please—I should prefer your knowing the cause as well as the effect.”

This intense bitterness smote Muriel’s tender heart more than all that had gone before. She hesitated, and Wentworth saw it.

“Child,” he said, with a troubled tenderness which was curiously and touchingly in contrast with the cynical hardness of his former words, “trust me thus far. I promise that you shall not regret it. Remember, I love you.”

She could not keep her heart from thrilling at that magical sentence, heard for the first time from his lips, and he perceived the quiver of irrepressible responsive feeling in her sensitive face.

“I love you,” he repeated, “with a love which I know will last me my life. It will be my life-long sorrow that this love of mine should have cast any shadow over your happiness at all; and do you think I would do anything to darken it more? Since you know this——”

Muriel checked him with a gesture; her senses were coming back to her again. "Do not say it!" she entreated. "It is not right."

"Not right?" Wentworth echoed scornfully. "I dare say it may not be right if you take it in that way. No, it is not right, I suppose; neither is it fitting, nor wise, nor sane even that a man of my years should give his heart into the keeping of a child like you. Yet that is what I have done. I know the whole thing is simple madness, but I cannot help myself, neither can you! I am quite powerless against this fate which has come upon us—do you think I would not escape it if I could? I cannot do otherwise than love you now, and I know that I shall continue to love you—to my cost—always."

Muriel drew one quick breath; then she spoke more resolutely than she had spoken yet. "Mr. Wentworth, I think you must be indeed mad to talk to me like this. You forget that you have a wife——"

He interrupted her again, almost fiercely this time. "Oh no! I don't forget it. On the contrary, I am painfully alive to the fact. I have a wife, most certainly: would you like to know what kind of person she is? I will tell

you. She is a pretty woman—I think I should almost be justified in calling her a beautiful woman—who would walk smilingly over her husband's heart to get herself an invitation to any particularly smart party, and to whom her children's lives and health are of infinitely less importance than the cut of her gown or the shape of her bonnet!"

He paused, and then continued rather more collectedly: "Perhaps you understand better now why the fact of my wife's existence does not weigh with me quite so heavily as it ought to do. Nevertheless, strange to say, there was a time when she filled a very large space in my thoughts indeed; it would be hardly too much to say that she absorbed them altogether! I told you once that my life might have been a different one if I had understood human nature better some twenty years ago. That is absolutely true. When I found I had been deceived—or let us call it mistaken: that sounds more polite—when I found I had been mistaken in *her*,—well, that was the beginning of the edifying history which has so greatly shocked your high-principled friend." He laughed bitterly.

"Did she—care for some one else?" Muriel faltered in an awestruck voice.

“She cared—as she cares now—for herself: the only human being she ever has cared or will care for. I made this gratifying discovery before we had been married three months, and I must own that I was totally unprepared for it. I was foolish enough to love her very madly, and simple enough to imagine that she loved me. I suppose I made too open a parade of my folly and simplicity, and so speedily precipitated a catastrophe which in any case could not have been very long in coming. My wife felt constrained to inform me that she disliked sentiment, and that she found my requirements absurd and exacting, and of a nature she was wholly disinclined to exert herself to satisfy. All this under pretty, courteous forms of speech, of course, for she has a high sense of decorum and refinement. Finally, thinking my excessive affection tiresome and inconvenient, she gave me a delicate hint to keep it to myself. Of course I obeyed her; it would have been very ill-bred to do otherwise. But, as I have mentioned to you before, I am not a stone nor an iceberg by nature, and that agreeable interview with Mrs. Wentworth served neither to improve my moral character nor to inspire me with profound reverence for her sex in general.”

He went on more hurriedly: "I did not allow myself to become broken-hearted in consequence of my wife's defection; I was not so absurdly weak. I indemnified myself for my disappointment as well as I could, and some of the methods I adopted were not particularly commendable, no doubt. Perhaps the less said about that part of the story the better—I am certainly not going to fill your innocent ears with an account of my transgressions. But the fact remains that it is only since I knew you that I have begun to measure the difference between what I am now and what I was fifteen years ago."

Muriel had drawn instinctively a little away from Wentworth as he spoke the words which by his own confession proclaimed him to be all that his enemies alleged. Hitherto she had not dwelt much on Mrs. Erskine's shadowy accusations, his single sin against herself having sufficed to dethrone him from his pedestal of honour in her heart; but now she had it from his own lips that this was only one of many offences against light and duty, and probably of a less heinous dye than the rest. For the moment she shrank from him, and Wentworth saw it.

"Believe me," he said, a spasm of pain contracting his features, "that whatever I have been

in other respects, with regard to you it was mere weakness and carelessness which led to the first great mistake. My marriage has not been such a happy one as to induce me to refer to it unnecessarily. When I first became aware of the error into which your quick imagination had led you, I was simply amused; and if I kept silence, it was from no special motive beyond my usual disinclination to speak of this particular matter. I did, however, mention it casually to Professor Erskine, because something—I forget what—seemed to lead to the subject. It is a mere chance that you did not learn the truth from him weeks ago.”

Wentworth still leant in his former position against the tree. He had at all times a peculiar gift for remaining perfectly still when he chose to do so, and, beyond an occasional sharp catching of his breath, he had hitherto betrayed little outward emotion. Now, however, he clasped his hands over the back of a garden chair that stood near, and Muriel could see that they trembled with the intensity of the feeling which he was keeping down.

“Latterly,” he continued, with a palpable effort at self-command, “it has been rather different, I confess. My silence for this last

week has been more or less deliberate and intentional. I am not going to excuse myself falsely; the reason I did not speak was simply because the temptation was too strong for me, and because I could not bear, seeing you so happily unconscious of the truth, to utter the words which I knew must give you such grievous pain. For on the same day that I found out how I loved you, Muriel, I learnt also that you loved me."

Muriel made a movement of dissent, which Wentworth saw and understood. "You did not realize it yourself then, I know," he answered in reply to her mute gesture. "But it was so, nevertheless; I knew it before you did. Well, I repeat that I attempt no defence; I only say the temptation was too strong for me. To be loved by you, even for a few days—I don't suppose any one ever loved me in that single-hearted, unselfish, trustful way before, except perhaps my children. If it were not for the sorrow I have brought upon you, I should consider the past gain outweighed the future suffering.

"You don't say a word!" he added, after a minute's silence. "Not a word of reproach even. It is true that nothing you could say could add

to my self-reproach for what is past and cannot be undone. When I saw your altered face just now, I think my sin was well avenged !”

Again there was a moment of silence, and then again Wentworth spoke, this time more brokenly : “That is all I have to say. I have no further plea to offer, and nothing whatever to urge in extenuation of what I have done. My great love and my great sorrow—can you forgive me for the sake of these, Muriel ?”

She raised her eyes and he saw that they were wet with tears. “I do forgive you,” she answered.

“And . . . you care for me a little still ? We are parting, recollect : it will not harm you to give me the poor comfort of knowing that your love for me is not quite dead. You will let me hear you say it ?”

“No,” she replied bravely, “I will never say that.”

“Why, you have said it !” Wentworth broke out ; “you have said it already, in your own sweet, childlike way. That night when we came back from our last row——”

A burning flush dyed Muriel’s pale cheeks as she interrupted him. “Then ! When I thought you the noblest man I had ever known, and felt

that your caring for me was an unspeakable honour! And now——”

“Now,” Wentworth said, completing the girl’s unfinished sentence with a bitter smile—“now that you know I am no transcendental, immaculate hero, but a mere ordinary man, with all a man’s frailties, I have ceased to interest you, you mean to say. But it is not really so, Muriel! You do love me still, whether you will confess it or not. I challenge you to look me in the face and say, ‘I do not love you!’”

Muriel looked up in answer to his challenge, and her eyes met his. Her lips parted to speak, but no sound came from them; her glance wavered, faltered, and fell again to the grass at his feet. As she turned abruptly away, a flash of triumph lit up Wentworth’s pale set face for a moment.

“Did you think yourself so fickle?” he asked softly. “You see, I knew you best.”

Muriel turned vehemently upon him. “And if I cannot quite get over that mad, wicked feeling at once,” she said, “I know I shall soon conquer it. I thought I had conquered it already, and if I have failed, it is not because I have not tried—and prayed——” Her voice failed her utterly.

"Poor child!" Wentworth replied pityingly, "did you think that you could crush such a feeling as love out of your heart in two days' time? If you go to your Bible itself, it will tell you that 'love is strong as death,' and that 'many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.' Oh, my darling, when one has really loved, one does not forget like that."

Overwhelmed for the moment, Muriel bent her face upon her hands, and Wentworth stood looking at her with such an expression of hopeless anguish in his eyes as might have moved his sternest censors to mingle a touch of compassion with their just sentence of condemnation.

"There is no use staying longer," he said at last; "I had better go. The best wish I can make for you, Muriel, is that you may forget me soon: Heaven knows what it costs me to utter it! Think as gently and as forgivingly and as kindly of me as you can. But I know you will do that; I think you are a little sorry for me now."

She looked up quickly. "Sorry for you?" she said. "If you only knew!"

It was her first unguarded utterance, and it was not without its results. It inspired

Wentworth with a fresh idea, as dangerous as it was new.

"Since you are indeed sorry for me," he said, "will you do something for me? It is nothing wrong, nothing that need trouble your conscience for a moment."

"If I could make you less unhappy," she answered doubtfully. It was the instinctive womanly longing to help and comfort that prompted her now.

"You could help me unspeakably," Wentworth rejoined earnestly. "See, things are so that we cannot be more than friends. Let us put away the recollection of last week's madness, and be again as we were before that time. Then we need not be wholly lost to each other. Perhaps we had better not meet again for a while, but I could write to you and you could write to me—as friends both of us—and your influence would not pass entirely out of my life. You might make it a better life as well as a happier one in that way."

Truly that was a perilous moment for Muriel Ferrars. With intuitive comprehension of her nature, Paul Wentworth had laid his hand on the one vulnerable point in her armour of defence. If he had pleaded with her to take pity

on her own heart, or even on his, she would have found no difficulty in resisting his pleading; but to influence him for good, to be as it were his guardian angel, to draw the wandering star back into its own celestial orbit again—*this* temptation was as insidious as it was strong. Satan looked very much like an angel of light just then.

Wentworth saw by Muriel's hesitation that he had partly prevailed. "Let us be friends," he urged again; "that much is still permitted us. And as for the past, let us forget it altogether!"

His own words defeated his object, for they let in a ray of light on the girl's bewildered soul. Unwittingly he himself had shown her the snare set for her.

"You said yourself that it was impossible to forget it," she answered with childlike directness, "and therefore it must be impossible for us to be friends as we were before. It would only be a hollow pretence."

"You shall see for yourself," he cried eagerly. "Trust me, and see if my letters shall go beyond the bounds I have set them!"

"Would they be letters which I could show my father and sister," Muriel asked simply, "or which you would care for your wife to read?"

Even if they were, do you think I should be permitted to receive or answer them openly? If I wrote to you, it must be in secret; you know that. Indeed, Mr. Wentworth, you must not write to me."

"Very well," he answered angrily, "I will not trouble you. You are like the rest, after all. I have asked you to help me, and you refuse for a mere conventional scruple. It is very natural; why should you care what happens to me, or whether, instead of being a better man for having known and loved you, I become an infinitely worse one? I have given you a glimpse of what my life has been for fifteen years in consequence of one woman's pitiless hardness; whatever it sinks to in the future, remember, will be not her work, but yours!"

Muriel clasped her hands together in an agony of distress. "Have a little pity!" she entreated despairingly. "Don't make it so hard for me to do right!"

She had touched the right chord at last. Her appeal to him, her voluntary throwing of herself upon his mercy, awoke every better and nobler impulse which lay dormant in Paul Wentworth's soul, and at the very moment when she seemed on the point of failure, she achieved

victory. His expression suddenly changed and softened.

"I have made everything hard to you, it seems, God forgive me!" he said remorsefully. "Yes, I believe you are right; we cannot be mere friends any longer, for—you must let me say it this once—we love each other too much for that. It must be all or nothing now—so we must needs be strangers—I suppose. Forgive me for thinking it could be otherwise."

A look of relief stole over Muriel's face as he spoke. She stood quietly in her place with her hands still locked together, but as she bent her head a single heavy tear dropped and fell on her clasped fingers. Wentworth drew a step nearer and laid his hand on hers.

"Dear," he said, "the pain will not always be so hard to bear. You are very young, child; you will live to forget and be happy by-and-by. I am different," he added less calmly. "My life has been pretty well lived out already; it is too late for me to look for compensation now. But I dare say I shall pretend to forget in the old fashion."

He paused, looking at her as she stood before him with the sunlight falling on her drooping head and pale face, knowing well that that look

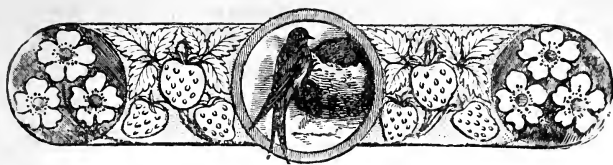
must be his last. She endured his silent gaze for a minute or two, and then quietly withdrew her hand. "Let us say—good-bye now," she said tremulously, lifting her wet eyes.

"You are in terrible haste for me to be gone," he said with a renewal of bitterness in his tone. "And you talk easily: 'Let us say good-bye'! I think we have partly said it already—we have begun the long good-bye that is to last us our lives. You can take it calmly enough now, because you do not know what it means—yet—— Well, railing will not help us; I had better go as you have suggested. Let it be good-bye, then!"

"Good-bye," she answered—more steadily this time. Then, with a sudden unforeseen movement, he caught her hands again, drew her towards him, and kissed her swiftly on the forehead.

"Good-bye," he repeated, releasing her. "And—one thing more. When I told you just now that I hoped you would soon cease to remember me, I was speaking falsely. I do *not* wish you to forget me—and I do not believe you will."

Those were his farewell words to her. And he waited for no reply to them, but went rapidly away over the soft turf as he had come—nor did he once look back.



CHAPTER IV.

A MODERN SIR GALAHAD.

"Unsubduable granite, piercing far and wide into the heavens, like an Alpine mountain; yet with clefts in it, and fountains, and green, beautiful valleys with flowers."—CARLYLE.

"No, I cannot say, Paul, that your holiday seems to have done you much good. On the contrary, you look far more fagged than you did before you started. I remarked that when you first came back."

Mrs. Wentworth was the speaker. She sat at the head of her handsomely appointed dinner-table, very becomingly attired in an exquisite evening toilette of pale sea-green brocade cunningly combined with clouds of soft, creamy lace, and looking quite as young, graceful, and pretty as she had looked three months before. For it was now early October, and a bright wood fire was burning in the recesses of the fine old

Venetian fireplace which Wentworth had persuaded an impecunious Italian prince to let him carry off in exchange for a pile of English bank-notes some ten years back.

Seen by the ruddy glow of this fire—which alone illumined his features at the moment, since the lamp which hung over the table was so screened as to cast its pearly light only on the fruit and flowers immediately beneath it—the face of Mrs. Wentworth's husband certainly justified her unflattering estimate of the effects of foreign travel upon his health. Unlike his wife, Wentworth looked as if he had grown decidedly older during the past quarter of a year. The bright alert air which sometimes made him appear younger than he really was had deserted him, and was replaced by an ill-concealed weariness and ennui which to an anxious eye might well betoken some hidden cause of suffering, physical or mental. Now, Alice's was not a specially anxious eye, perhaps, but it was an exceedingly acute and penetrating one, and the change in her husband's demeanour had not escaped it.

Her wifely remarks did not meet with a particularly gracious reception. "I enjoyed the holiday excessively, nevertheless," was all the

response she received, and this delivered in a tone savouring of defiance.

Alice elevated her delicate eyebrows ever so slightly. "I am very glad to hear it," she replied. "But things may be pleasant which are hardly beneficial, and it strikes me that, whatever the other *agréments* of your trip may have been, you went wrong in your choice of a climate. You look thoroughly out of sorts. Doesn't he, Philip?" she asked, addressing her solitary guest—the only other person present, for the dessert stage of dining had been reached, and the servants had already withdrawn to a more congenial sphere.

The young man thus appealed to—a tall, slender personage, fair-haired and fair-complexioned, with features so classically regular as to give a cameo-like effect to his fine profile—raised a pair of remarkably clear and piercing blue eyes and fixed them on his host.

"Your wife is right; you are not looking well, Paul," he said gravely—and there was just a shade of reproof mingling with the tone of real concern in his voice. "I imagine you did too much literary work in Switzerland to be able to benefit by the change and rest as much as you ought to have done."

"I quite agree with you there, Philip," Mrs. Wentworth said warmly. "I believe Paul would do far better if he could be content to give up dabbling in ephemeral literature. After all, what honour can possibly accrue from these things? They are read one moment, forgotten the next." She shrugged her white shoulders contemptuously.

"And they bring in no money, or none worth reckoning, eh?" said her husband, with a supercilious curl of the lip. "No doubt it is a weakness on my part, but I rather like writing on non-professional subjects. Deeply interesting and—what is more to the purpose—highly lucrative as my profession is, I actually like occasionally to forget that I am a lawyer! It is a curious fancy, but so it is. And what would you have? Every man must have his hobby, and I can assure you that in the pursuit of mine I don't neglect my work, my *paying* work, Alice!"

I have said before that Alice Wentworth was not a sensitive person. As a rule, Paul's satirical shafts glanced innocuously off her triple armour of indifference, self-satisfaction, and insensibility to ridicule; but to-night his barbed words did pierce a little way between the joints of the usually impenetrable harness, and a faint

flush of annoyance and mortification rose in her cheek as he uttered them. Perhaps the presence of her brother-in-law, of whom she stood in considerable awe, and for whom, in spite of the serious disapprobation with which she knew him to regard her plan of life and code of morals, she had an odd, unwilling liking and respect, rendered her more susceptible to Wentworth's scornful thrusts on this particular evening.

Most people stood a little in awe of Philip Irvine. Though he was but six and twenty, his individuality was already more marked than that of most men of middle age: there was no hesitation, no diffidence, no uncertainty about him. His character stood out rounded and uncompromising, absolutely lacking in bare outlines and crude tones waiting to be filled up or coloured over. Life and further experience of life might soften him—some people thought that he needed softening sadly—but that was the sum total of the change they would be likely to effect. Irvine was a man who had elected his own path and was determinedly walking in it, who had selected his own burden and seemed resolved to carry it to the end. No one really doubted the sincerity of his choice; and if some were found to pity him as a well-intentioned fanatic,

and others to chafe at him as a Puritan and a prig, very few ventured to sneer at him as a hypocrite. Of himself he would simply have said that he was a Christian. Christianity to his mind, as to the minds of certain others not unlike him in ages now long passed away, involved the necessity of renouncing the world : whatever therefore appeared to Philip Irvine to be included under that generic term he did renounce, and renounced it absolutely. He was thoroughly convinced that religion was the one thing needful for every human soul ; hence followed the corollary that, having acquired this pearl of great price himself, it was his duty to spend his life in endeavouring to impart it to others. And in fact he did spend his life in this manner. People came to know it, and respected him accordingly ; it was impossible to help respecting such a man, they said, however little one might sympathize with his transcendental standard and his wild ideas about Christian Socialism. For Irvine was a Radical as well as a Puritan ; Bethnal Green had made him one, he said. All the more reason for avoiding the atmosphere of Bethnal Green, his well-bred High Church Tory friends thought in the unacknowledged depths of their hearts.

One accusation most frequently levelled at Philip Irvine was that of narrowness and hardness, and of consequent want of mercy for his weaker brethren. Narrow he perhaps was in his utter inability to look at or consider the mere side issues—the advisability or expediency—of a question when once he had decided upon its intrinsic right and wrong; hard he certainly was upon the fashionable follies and frivolities which seemed to him of such infinitely little moment compared with the eternal realities of which he himself never lost sight, and so atrociously incongruous when practised in close proximity to the seething commonwealth of misery and crime with which he was daily brought in contact; merciless he undoubtedly was in condemning sin wherever he found it, and in his own stern purity perhaps inclined rather to threaten the offender with the penalties of the law than to seek to soften him by the milder pleadings of the gospel—at least, where the offender had plainly sinned against light and knowledge, since for the ignorant and uneducated he had compassion enough and to spare. Then he had a natural gift of satirical speech, and it must be acknowledged—since, high-minded as he was, Irvine had his share of human weak-

nesses—that he occasionally put it to what he would himself have called an “unsanctified use.” This gift, combined with a cold and impassive manner, and the more regrettable narrowness of sympathy which his Puritan training had engrafted upon a naturally ascetic temperament, leading him to look somewhat askance on things beautiful and joyous, as if they contained in themselves some taint of evil, did not tend to make him popular with his social equals. They respected him, as has been said—but very few of them loved him.

On the other hand, he had his school of disciples, an enthusiastic band of warm-hearted, earnest-minded lads fresh from Oxford, who regarded “Irvine of Bride’s” as a Heaven-sent leader in the crusade they were eager to wage against vice and misery and unbelief, and who were ready for any amount of “plain living and high thinking” at his command. And he had his friends in Bethnal Green. These last were, after all, his truest friends: they did not find him narrow, or cold, or severe. Ask the gutter children who swarmed into the ragged school over which Philip Irvine presided if he were hard and unkind; ask the rough, shy, turbulent hobbledahoys whom he persuaded to attend his

penny readings and evening lectures if he were supercilious or unsympathizing; ask the miserable outcasts who sometimes crept into the shadow of the Mission Hall planted in the very midst of the foulest haunts of vice, where Irvine might be found week after week pleading with his hearers to have mercy upon themselves before it should be too late, if he were pitiless and unloving! Verily, Park Lane and Grosvenor Square knew but one side of the man; the other remained a sealed book to the denizens of those regions.

They knew him a little better at Oxford, where he still resided in term, giving himself, with the quiet thoroughness which characterized all the actions of his life, to his work as a tutor and lecturer of his college. He had taken distinguished honours in mathematics, and had been elected Fellow of St. Bride's at an unusually early age; and, as he conceived that the acceptance of a Fellowship implied a covenant on his part to perform faithfully certain duties originally considered to appertain to the position acquired, he had made up his mind to reside in the university so long as he could be actively employed there. Besides, he held that the opportunity thus afforded him of influencing

the rising generation of Oxford men was one that he had no right to fling away.

So seven months in every year were devoted to work in college and university; and then, when his brother Fellows retired to pleasant country houses, or scattered themselves far and wide over the face of the two hemispheres, seeking rest and recreation, Philip Irvine packed his portmanteau and betook himself to a dingy little red-brick Mission House in the worst part of Bethnal Green, to toil contentedly in pestilential slums and noisome alleys in the endless task of trying to relieve the desperately poor and reclaim the desperately wicked until term time came round again. . Many of his Oxford contemporaries wondered "why Irvine didn't take orders. He was cut out for a parson, if ever man was." Irvine himself replied to this that he felt no call to the ministerial office. Perhaps he thought he could effect more as a simple layman than he would have been likely to do had his work partaken in any degree of a professional character; and the peculiar mixture of Puritanism and Socialism which coloured all his religious views prevented his regarding the ordained clergy as invested with any special sanctity or authority which

was not equally the heritage and privilege of the ordinary Christian.

It was a strange fate which had made him Paul Wentworth's half-brother. The great world of London did not contain two men more utterly dissimilar in natural character or more diametrically opposed to one another in principles and in mode of life. It was not only that one was essentially self-indulgent and the other before all things self-restrained, that one consulted his pleasure as a guide of conduct while the other lived in the sternest sense according to the dictates of duty, that one was a man of the world and the other a man of the Bible—if Philip had been irreligious and Paul strictly virtuous, there would still have subsisted between the brothers the great fundamental difference which must always subsist between a simple and a complex nature. Philip's strength would in any case have been concentrated on some single absorbing subject of interest. He had not a spark of Paul's wealth of imagination, not a trace of his picturesque, fascinating many-sidedness; none of the quick sensibility, nothing of the susceptible, impressionable æsthetic temperament which had always been his brother's most dangerous enemy. Excepting for the

satirical bent of their minds—disciplined in Philip's case and undisciplined in Paul's—there was not a single point of moral likeness between the two. Their mental gifts varied as widely from each other as their moral constitutions and their external appearance, and the intellect that was brilliant and daring in the elder man became simply painstaking and tenacious in the younger.

To all these points of discrepancy may be added nearly fifteen years' difference in age. Paul Wentworth's mother had been left a widow very early in life, when he himself, her only child, was still little more than an infant. She was a pretty, agreeable young woman, not troubled with sentimental fancies or transcendental ideas on the subject of fidelity to the memory of past attachments; and she was, moreover, very badly off. Hence it came to pass that when the Reverend Purefoy Irvine, the wealthy middle-aged bachelor rector of a pleasant parish in Devonshire, offered his hand and heart to the charming widow, she accepted the offer with alacrity, and without giving more than a passing pang of regret to the recollection of the young husband whose idol she had been, and who had lain barely a year in his already half-forgotten grave. Mrs. Irvine had several

children by her second marriage, but of these only two—Margaret, the eldest daughter, and Philip, who was ten years younger than his sister—lived to reach manhood and womanhood; and before Philip had taken his degree at Oxford, he had lost both his parents. He had therefore only two near relations left in the world; and as he had early registered an inflexible resolution—his Puritanism would not allow him to call it a vow—to form no fresh ties that might impede and hamper him in the life of self-abnegation he had voluntarily embraced, he was fain to draw the existing links all the closer, although, even in the case of his sister, deep spiritual union was out of the question. Margaret Irvine, a clever and charming woman, was warmly attached to her brother, but their views and opinions by no means invariably coincided; Philip more than suspected her of rationalism in theory, and openly reproached her with latitudinarianism in practice. Having inherited a considerable fortune from a distant relative who happened to be childless, Margaret was much richer than Philip; and he held it to be a dereliction of duty on her part that, after providing for the necessaries of life, she did not devote the whole

of her income to the cause he had at heart, and to which he himself devoted the simple competency left him by his father. Now, Miss Irvine was high-principled and even philanthropic; but she was a woman of the nineteenth century, not a knight-errant of the legendary ages like her brother. Therefore she had her bright little house in Mayfair, and her pretty cottage in Devonshire, and cultivated her mind and indulged her artistic tastes while not neglecting good works—and on the whole she spent her time and her money well and wisely. But she did not satisfy Philip's standard. And if Philip felt dissatisfied with his sister, what attitude, save one, could his mind assume towards his half-brother, a man whose words and deeds were in daily flat contravention of every principle he held most sacred? What sympathy could possibly exist between them?

Of sympathy, indeed, there could have existed little; but on both sides there did exist much undoubted affection. Wentworth's undisciplined nature was full of warm and tender impulses, and he clung with remarkable tenacity to family ties as such. Also, though he did not fully understand his brother, he respected him profoundly; while Irvine, who (except in a

wide and spiritual sense) was not particularly affectionate, had a deeper personal feeling for Wentworth than for any one else in the world. Not that he was blind to Wentworth's errors. Far from it. He had not hesitated to rebuke him for them more than once, with a desperate sincerity and an impassioned earnestness which had served to disarm Wentworth's natural indignation at finding himself taken morally to task by a brother fifteen years his junior. I cannot say that the young reformer's remonstrances and exhortations had so far produced any perceptible good effect; and the reformer himself knew of his failure, and recognized mournfully that "the time was not yet." His faith was strong, and, like most strong things, patient: that the time would eventually come he firmly believed. Meanwhile he waited—and doubtless prayed.

On this particular evening he was in a specially softened mood as regarded his brother, for he saw that Paul was ill at ease, if not positively unhappy. Perhaps he did not pass quite such severe mental judgment as he should by rights have passed upon the bitter speeches addressed to Alice, for the very natural, human, and unsaintlike reason that he disliked his

sister-in-law. He thought her frivolous and artificial—two sins on which he was apt to be peculiarly unmerciful wherever he encountered them; and he more than suspected her of having played a leading part in the circumstances which led to her husband's moral downfall. Of course he had been a mere child at the time of Paul's marriage, and no confidence on the subject of his relations with his wife had at any time crossed Paul's lips in conversation with his brother; still Philip was too acute a student of human nature not to have read a good way into the enigma of the home life over which Alice presided. It was therefore with small sympathy for Alice's annoyance, and rather from a desire to divert the current of his brother's thoughts than from any loftier motive, that he took up the dropped thread of the conversation, severed suddenly by Wentworth's unexpected retort, and endeavoured to guide the conversation itself into a more agreeable channel.

"It is possible to have too much of work, whether it be strictly serious work or not," he said, in so unmoved a manner that Alice wondered whether he could be dull enough to have failed to perceive the drift of her husband's remarks. "The time comes when, if you don't

oil the machine a little, the wheels begin to creak very palpably. I have discovered that truth myself, and I mean in consequence to take a holiday next week, and go down for a few days into the country."

"Indeed!" returned his sister-in-law. "I am extremely glad to hear you have resolved on so eminently sensible a plan. Where are you going, Philip?"

"Not very far off." (Irvine had created the diversion he desired to create, and was prepared to answer any number of questions with resignation.) "To a place called Alderton, in Holmshire, about thirty miles from town. I believe, however, that it is perfectly rural and sequestered; and very pretty too, I am told."

Wentworth had been leaning back silently, balancing a silver fruit-knife between two of his fingers for several minutes; but as his brother spoke he started upright in his chair, and his weary, absent expression gave way to one of tense inquiry.

"I don't think I ever heard of it," Alice commented reflectively. She was still looking at her brother-in-law, and did not observe her husband's significant change of attitude.

"You would not be likely to hear of it: it is

a mere village, though a picturesque place in its way—at least, from what they tell me—and boasts itself as possessing the most beautiful common in England. The people I am going to stay with live on the edge of this common.”

Wentworth was now as white as ashes. He laid his right hand down on the table to steady it, but the fruit-knife shook in his fingers.

“What are their names, Philip? Have I ever met them?” inquired Mrs. Wentworth with sisterly interest.

“I don’t think you have ever met them. Their name is Ferrars—— Hallo! what’s that?”

“It is only that Paul has knocked over a flower-glass,” answered Mrs. Wentworth with a touch of asperity, and frowning slightly at the damage done to the symmetry of her elaborate table decoration. “Pray don’t try to remedy the mischief; you will only make matters worse. Ferrars, you say, Philip? I never heard you mention any Ferrars before; I did not know you had any intimate friends of that name.”

“Well, these people cannot be called friends of mine, for I have never yet seen them—that is to say, those members of the family who live at Alderton. I am going down on the invitation

of George Ferrars, the son of the house, who is one of our scholars at St. Bride's."

"And what is this Mr. Ferrars of Alderton? Vicar of the parish?"

"No, I fancy he is a small country squire. He lives in an old manor house, which young Ferrars tells me is a choice morsel for the archæologist. The kind of place that would suit you, Paul," Irvine added, turning to his brother: "all oak wainscoting and Tudor windows."

In spite of his wife's injunctions to the contrary, Wentworth was elaborately replacing and rearranging the fallen chrysanthemums, and took no notice of the remark addressed to him.

Alice continued her questions. "Shall you meet any one there—any one you know?"

Irvine shook his head. "Scarcely, I think. Ferrars apologized for asking me in the dead season, and intimated there would be no one in the house but the family."

"What does the family consist of?"

"Mr. Ferrars is a widower, and my pupil is his only son. Then there are two daughters, younger than their brother."

"Are they grown up?"

"I fancy so; but they must be still quite young girls. Stay, I think I made a mistake

just now when I said I had never met any of the family before. I believe I must have seen one of the two sisters about a year ago at Professor Erskine's. Erskine is Ferrars' uncle, and I know this girl was related to him in some way."

"Did you like her? Was she a nice girl?" Alice would have liked to ask if she were pretty, but refrained for fear Irvine should think the question frivolous.

"I don't remember her very distinctly," the young man answered frankly; "but as far as I recollect she was much like other girls of her age. Now I think of it, I am certain she was a Miss Ferrars. She was very like her brother; and the Erskines called her Muriel, and I know Ferrars has a sister of that name."

Wentworth sprang up with a suppressed, inarticulate exclamation, pushed back his chair, and walked over to the fireplace, where he knelt down on one knee and made a feint of warming his hands at the blaze. "It is atrociously cold to-night," he observed, as if offering an excuse for his unceremonious and precipitate movement. Irvine looked at him a little curiously. Alice rose with a slight air of offence.

"Since you have set me the example of leaving

the table, Paul," she said with a kind of suave acerbity, "I think I will go upstairs. I shall see you again, Philip, I suppose?"—pausing at the door, which her brother-in-law opened for her. "I hope you have no engagement at the East End for once in a way?"

"Only a very late one," Irvine replied with one of his grave smiles. "I shall come up for some tea before I go, if you will allow me."

Alice nodded a gracious acquiescence as she passed him by. He closed the door after her and went back to his place, where he sat for a minute or two thoughtfully contemplating his brother, who maintained his former position on the hearthrug, and seemed unconscious of the scrutiny to which he was being subjected. There was a shade of uneasiness mingling with the penetrating intensity of Irvine's gaze.

Presently Wentworth roused himself from his pre-occupation. Giving himself a kind of impatient shake, and stifling something which sounded like an incipient sigh, he rose and resumed his seat at the bottom of the table. "Well, how far are you satisfied with the book?" he asked, mechanically pushing the claret towards his brother. "No? Oh, I forgot! I beg your pardon." (Irvine, among other things

was a rigid teetotaler.) "I suppose you got your copy on Tuesday?"

"Yes, by the first post. You have enlarged the scope of the work beyond what I expected or even hoped. It is making a great deal of noise already."

"You share in any honour accruing from such commotion," Wentworth said with a faint smile, "for the book is in great measure due to your inspiration."

"Hardly that. I supplied a certain number of facts and statistics which may have been useful, but it is you who have breathed spirit into the dry bones."

"The facts and statistics are the foundation of the whole argument," Wentworth answered drily, "and they certainly were such as I should never have collected for myself. The rest was merely the amusement of a leisure hour."

"Well, I hope the book may do good in opening people's eyes to the unutterable iniquity which is rampant in their very midst. There is only one thing I could wish altered about it."

"What is that?"

"I should have been glad if you had seen fit to cast some of your remarks in a more serious form. These great social questions are too

momentous to be properly treated from an ironical point of view. To make them a peg for satire induces many people to think you less in earnest than you perhaps really are."

"Perhaps!" echoed Wentworth, getting up and going to the fire again. "I assure you I am in deadly earnest. Your definition of 'seriousness' may not altogether tally with mine, but I can tell you that I look upon life as a desperately serious business altogether. I don't know why it pleases you to regard me as a kind of human butterfly. You know something of the world, Philip: has your experience taught you that the man who mocks most persistently at his neighbours' oddities and absurdities invariably carries the lightest heart under his motley coat?"

"I find him very liable to be supposed to do so," Irvine answered coldly. "But if you find these questions really interest you, why not inquire into them further?"

"I have so much time for inquiry!"

"You told me some months ago that you thought of giving up work as a practising barrister before long. If you were free from professional trammels, you might well turn your attention to those problems we have been speak-

ing of. You might even help forward their solution in Parliament."

"Ask my wife what she thinks of your suggestion," Wentworth retorted bitterly. "She has given me her opinion in unmistakable terms already. No, my profession is not likely to be quit of me so long as I can make anything by it."

He spoke in so decisive a manner, and the subject was so evidently a painful one, that Irvine accepted his reply as closing the discussion, and did not attempt to continue it. After a few minutes' indifferent conversation on other topics, he made a movement to leave the dining-room. "Had we not better join Alice?" he asked suggestively.

"Wait a moment," said Wentworth, jerking out his words with manifest effort. "There is something I wish to say to you first."

Irvine turned and faced his brother, resting his right hand on the back of the chair which Alice had lately occupied. Wentworth, with one arm on the mantelpiece and his cheek leaning on his hand, had his face completely shielded from the glow of the fire—and the attitude possessed the additional advantage of partially shading his features from the steadfast gaze of

his companion. "You said just now that you were going next week to stay with some people called Ferrars?" he began.

Irvine assented. "Do you know them?" he asked. The faint shade of uneasiness observable previously in his look had now extended itself to his manner.

"I am not acquainted with Mr. Ferrars," Wentworth answered in his iciest tone, without altering his position. "And I cannot be said to know the family, strictly speaking. What I know of them is through . . . a relative." He paused, as if to take breath. Irvine remained stiffly attentive, but did not assist him by putting any question.

"However," Wentworth went on determinedly, as if he were bent on speaking at all costs, "you are going to stay with these people, it appears. I should esteem it a favour if during your visit you would be silent on the subject of your relationship to me."

Irvine drew up his long throat, looking profoundly startled and not a little displeased. "This is a very singular request, Paul," he said. "May I inquire your motive in making it?"

"A good and sufficient motive, or I should not have troubled you on such a matter; but one

which I do not feel inclined to discuss with any one. I must beg you to excuse my mentioning it, therefore."

"This further secrecy only adds to the strangeness of the demand," replied Irvine, rather nettled by his brother's haughty manner. "Of course I can advance no adequate reason for refusing to accede to your wish, as I cannot possibly guess what prompted it. At the same time, I must say I should have felt better satisfied if you had seen fit to give me some kind of explanation on the subject."

Wentworth suddenly raised his head, and turned his dark eyes blazing with wrath upon his brother. "Oblige me by going without an explanation for once, will you not?" he said in a voice low with suppressed passion. "Between brothers, the favour is small, I think!"

"The favour is already granted," Irvine answered, with an emphasis on the leading word which showed that he at least considered it no slight one, "and I have of course no wish to intrude myself on your confidence. Mere silence respecting a fact unimportant in itself to the family of complete strangers whose acquaintance I am about to make, and of which it was improbable I should have apprised them in any case,

cannot involve me in any course of action of which as a Christian man I should be bound to disapprove. I am therefore glad that it is in my power to do what you ask. Let us consider that settled. And now, shall we go upstairs?"

Upstairs Alice awaited them, all smiles. She had since dinner added some finishing touches to her costume, and the compliments of her maid and her looking-glass—from both of which she learnt that she was in specially charming looks that evening—had quite restored her to good humour. She addressed her husband with marked graciousness as he entered.

"I suppose you will want to be off at once," she said, "so I had better ring for tea directly." She put her pretty hand on the bell close by, and then turned to her brother-in-law. "By the way, Philip, I have not yet apologized for asking you to dinner at such a barbarously early hour. But I was obliged to do so out of respect for Paul's engagement."

"Have you an appointment this evening, then?" inquired Irvine of his brother.

"An appointment at the Athenæum, that's all," returned Wentworth lightly. "Don't you know that to-night is the *première* of 'Romeo and Juliet'? Oh, I beg your pardon! I forgot

you disapproved on principle of the theatre. The drama is not among the recreations you recommend for the mental and moral elevation of the masses, is it?"

"No," Irvine answered, a little sternly. "I doubt the beneficial effects of play-going on any mind; and in the majority of cases it proves a great snare."

"Oh, a snare!" Wentworth rejoined mockingly. "Everything pleasant and beautiful in the world is a snare, according to the enthusiasts of your school; you have robbed us of most of the things which make life worth living already. One cannot always be looking out for pitfalls. Well, I must not linger, even for tea, or I shall lose the best part of what I am afraid you consider my unhallowed amusement. Good night, Philip. If you can stay a little longer, I have no doubt Alice will be duly grateful. I am sorry to say that I believe she too intends to trust herself among snares to-night, but her particular form of gin will not be in working order for the next couple of hours. Good night."

As the door closed behind Wentworth, Alice sank back in her seat with a little affected laugh. "Among the things which Paul has not succeeded in improving by his trip on the Continent, I fear

we must reckon his manners," she said. "He had quite forgotten to put the button on his foil to-night; at dinner he was positively dangerous. Am I to apologize for him, Philip?"

"To me? for my brother?" Irvine asked, with such an innocent gravity of demeanour that Alice was hardly conscious of the lurking satire his words contained. "Certainly not; it would be quite an unnecessary waste of time."

Alice accepted the hint. She was quite grateful to Irvine for giving it her in time—she knew she had barely escaped yielding to the temptation of entering on a critical discussion of her husband's character with her husband's brother. That would have been inexcusable folly indeed. "What an escape!" she ejaculated mentally, daintily helping herself to cream and sugar meanwhile (the footman having at length arrived with the tardy tea-tray); "I might as well have put myself into the hands of the Grand Inquisitor, as have given our good Philip such a chance of trying his moral probe upon me! There is no saying what I might not have brought down on my devoted head by such rashness."



CHAPTER V.

STELLA.

"Give me Michael with his sword
Rather than such angels, Lord!"

E. B. BROWNING.

PHILIP IRVINE had not the smallest intention of spending the whole evening with his sister-in-law. Her society was thoroughly uncongenial to him; and as he was hopeless of bringing any spiritual influence to bear upon her, he did not feel constrained to endure this uncongeniality longer than actual courtesy demanded. After half an hour, therefore—half an hour which to Irvine appeared to have been wasted in elaborate talk about nothing—he rose to take his leave.

"Come and see us as soon as you get back to town, won't you?" Alice said cordially. She would gladly have kept the young man a little longer, for it still wanted an hour of the time

when she could set out for the first of the two parties at which she meant to be present that evening.

"As soon as I can, I certainly will. I shall hope to find Paul looking more himself, for I feel a little concerned about him. I agree with you that he works too hard."

"He burns the candle at both ends," replied Mrs. Wentworth. "How should he look otherwise than tired, with the life he leads? Of course a great practice like his is fagging in itself—still, a man with such an iron constitution as Paul's might well do even his allowance of work with impunity. But when he persists in adding to this literary work in all his odd moments, and perpetual dining out, with a series of evening parties to follow, and habitually sleeps only about two hours out of the twenty-four, what can you expect? How he holds on through it as he does is a mystery to me!"

"I should think he must be tired of it all in every sense of the word," Philip Irvine observed severely.

Alice gave her little answering shrug and laughed her silvery artificial laugh. "Oh! in your sense, he is not the least tired, I can assure you! No one, I should say, ever suffered less

from world-weariness; on the contrary, I fancy that as a rule he enjoys himself madly. He has all the excitability of a Greek or an Italian joined to the energy of an English boy of fifteen, and if his energy did not expend itself in one direction, it would in another—it must have some outlet. To give you an example. To-night very probably he will come home about the witching hour of three; and ten to one but he will get up an hour earlier than usual to-morrow morning because he has promised to give Stella a drawing-lesson or play hide-and-seek with Mabel!”

The judicial frown on Irvine's young brow relaxed a little at Alice's last words. He had always regarded Paul's devotion to his children as the most hopeful point about him. “It is curious,” he said only half aloud, as if reflecting audibly.

“Don't you remember,” Mrs. Wentworth continued, playing with the tassels of her fan—she was drifting into danger again and knew it, but this time the temptation had proved irresistible—“that French *savant* who dined here with you last June? I forget his name, but you know whom I mean: he was a celebrated biologist. Well, later on in the same evening I met him

again at the American Minister's. I was sitting where I could have touched him, but, like many of these scientific men, he is very short-sighted and didn't recognize me, or he would probably have spoken in a lower key, for he was discussing Paul freely with the French ambassador. On the whole his strain was highly complimentary; but what struck me was his reply after hearing from the ambassador some of the facts of Paul's career. '*Ciel, quel homme!*' he said. '*Mais c'est une énigme! c'est une énigme!*' And I partly agreed with him."

"It is very frank of you to say as much," Irvine answered with tranquil irony. "Sometimes it is possible by diligent investigation to find out *le mot de l'énigme* in a riddle of this kind. It might even be well to try. Well, I shall hope to look in upon you in about three weeks' time. Good night."

They shook hands, and Irvine opened the door to depart. As he did so, there was a sound of rustling and whispering on an upper landing, followed by a scuffle of children's feet, which halted suddenly halfway down the stairs; and then a clear treble voice demanded over the balusters: "Mother, where's father?"

Mrs. Wentworth advanced into the doorway.

"Estelle," she said rather sharply, "have you forgotten what I told you about calling over the stairs? Come down both of you, as you are there, and speak to your uncle Philip."

The young ladies performed the rest of their downward journey in more sober fashion; but with a good grace, for they were fond of Irvine, who had the gift of attracting children. Nevertheless, as soon as the actual greetings were over, Estelle returned to her original charge of "Mother, where's father?"

"He has gone out," Alice returned laconically.

"And not coming back?" in a voice of profound dismay.

"Not before your bedtime, if that is what you mean. It is very late for you to be up now."

"How long has he been gone?" Estelle demanded eagerly.

"My dear child, how can I possibly tell you? Three quarters of an hour, perhaps."

"I told you I heard the hall door shut, Mab!" exclaimed Estelle, who was on the verge of angry tears. "Oh, how unkind of him! He *promised* to come upstairs before he went, and now he hasn't even said good night!"

Irvine was sorry for the child's evident dis-

appointment. "I kept your father talking, and he had to rush off in a great hurry at the last, Estelle," he said soothingly. "I dare say that was the reason he forgot his promise."

Estelle's dark eyes—perfect replicas of her father's, which contrasted strangely enough with her bright hair and fair skin—gave an ominous flash that had all Paul's fiery spirit in it. "He had no business to forget," she murmured vengefully.

"Oh, Stella!" cried Mabel in a deprecating tone. Mabel's eyes were blue, and she was altogether a more timid and conventional creature than her sister, who had inherited a good deal from Wentworth besides his eyes.

"He never did such a thing in all his life before," continued the unabashed Estelle hotly. "Never, never!"

"There lies the wonder, I should say," her mother responded with a sarcastic laugh. "Well, my dear, you need not excite yourself so much about the matter. Bid your uncle good night, for it is high time you were in bed. I wonder what Miss Lawson has been thinking about to let you stay up so long?"

"Miss Lawson's gone to bed herself with a headache. Good night, Uncle Philip; good night,

mother," as Alice bent to bestow a somewhat cold and perfunctory kiss. "You won't see father again to-night, will you, uncle?" Estelle had swung round on one foot as she reached the first landing, and was clearly revolving mentally a message of reproach.

"No, not to-night."

"Oh!"—with a deep sigh of regret. "Well, it can't be helped, I suppose." She nodded and vanished.

"You see how he spoils them!" Alice said with a touch of indignation. "Estelle is a perfect little fury if anything displeases her, and Mabel is her echo and shadow; yet, according to Paul, they can neither of them do wrong. I have ceased attempting to manage Estelle long ago; and now Paul and the governess may fight matters out between themselves as well as they can. They are sworn adversaries, as it is. Are you going, Philip? Well, good-bye, once more."

It must be reluctantly admitted that the rebellious damsels under discussion were already justifying the maternal censure by disobeying the maternal injunctions. Instead of going at once to bed, they had betaken themselves to the empty schoolroom, where the absence of the lamp and the governess and the presence of a

comfortable hearthrug and a blazing fire promised facilities for warmth and chatter, and they were sitting in a curiously tangled heap on the afore-said rug, both giving vent to their regrets in loud lamentations—to which Estelle added some forcible strictures on her father's unprecedented, reprehensible, and heartless conduct. At length—having pretty well exhausted this subject, and the friendly darkness inviting to confidence—she looked round her cautiously, and then observed in a mysterious manner, “Do you know, Mabel——”

“Well?” said Mabel impatiently, judging that some important communication was at hand.

“It's only something I think. I don't believe mother cares about father one little bit! There!”

“Oh, Stella, what a dreadful thing to say!”

“It's true,” Stella responded emphatically. “I am quite sure of it.”

“What makes you think so?”

“I don't know exactly. I used to think so a great while ago, and now I'm certain of it. I can see it somehow.”

“Well, you know,” said Mabel in a hesitating fashion, “sometimes I've been afraid that mother wasn't *very* fond of *us*. Do you think she doesn't care for us at all either?”

"No-o," replied Estelle slowly, "I think she does care for us just a little. Not very much, though," she added in a melancholy tone. "But I don't believe she *likes* father, even. It's so queer!"

"Why is it queer?"

"Why, because he's her husband, and then he's so awfully nice—did you ever see any one half so nice? I always thought that when I grew up, I should like to marry somebody exactly like him!"

"You'd want him to be younger, though."

"A little, perhaps; but I don't call father old. And I never saw any one to come near him for sweetness and kindness and cleverness. He's tremendously clever, you know—and then he's *ever* so handsome! I think he's simply perfect," Stella concluded with a burst of enthusiastic admiration.

"Father's a darling." Mabel gave her assent with equal warmth of tone, but greater sobriety of epithet.

"He wasn't at all a darling to-night, though," cried Stella, flying off again to her old grievance. "It was horrid of him to go out and forget all about us like that. I wish I could punish him!" she said, shaking her right hand me-

nacingly above her head; "but anyhow, I've thought of something we might do. It would be splendid fun!"

"What's that?"

"Why, we might keep awake till he comes in—I'll get up and open our door as soon as Dickinson goes away, so that we shall hear him—and then just put on our things and run down. If he says anything, *I* shall say, 'Sir, you did not take any leave of us; so this midnight raid is in consequence of your own unfeeling conduct.' Oh, what fun it will be to see his face!"

"But, Stella"—Mabel generally met Stella's daring schemes with a feeble and ineffectual "but"—"I don't see how we can. Élise will be sitting up for mother, and you know she always leaves the door wide open so as to hear the carriage come. She'd go and knock Miss Lawson up directly."

"Élise will be sound asleep hours before father comes in," said Estelle confidently. "She always falls asleep before she has waited an hour. The great thing is—can *you* keep awake?"

"I don't know," replied Mabel doubtfully. "I am afraid I couldn't," she confessed with desperate honesty; "but you might shake me, you know!"

However, when the shaking process was called into operation, it proved a total failure. The first time she experienced it, Mabel did indeed jump up in a fright, exclaiming, "Has he come?"

"No, no; not yet," Estelle answered. "But you mustn't go to sleep again, or I shan't be able to wake you when he does come, perhaps."

"I'll try not," said Mabel heroically. "But oh, Stella, don't you think we'd better wait till to-morrow morning?"

"Wait till to-morrow morning!" echoed Stella with profound scorn. "And give it all up? I should just think not!"

"Well, I'll try," Mabel repeated. But drowsiness proved too much for her determination, and in three minutes she was again slumbering heavily. Estelle made one more attempt to rouse her, but this time without the faintest success.

"Then I shall go down by myself, that's all," she said aloud, turning on her pillow with an angry flounce, and contemptuously apostrophizing her sleeping sister: "you are no better than a baby!"

* * * * *

Mrs. Wentworth had for once gone astray in her calculation of probabilities. The "witching

hour of three" was still a long way off when her husband opened the outer door softly with his latchkey, and entered the wide and empty but still brilliantly lighted hall from which she herself had gone out barely an hour before. He had, in fact, come straight home from the theatre.

Perhaps it was the result of the excitement attendant on his "unhallowed amusement," but it is certain that both in bearing and expression Wentworth was a perfectly different man to what he had been four hours earlier. He came in erect and alert as ever, with his head held high, and with a subdued sparkle in his eyes which boded no special good to something or some one. There was suppressed excitement even in his manner of throwing off his light overcoat and giving two or three brief orders to the sleepy servant who came forward to receive it; and his very step on the marble flags of the hall sounded lighter and more ringing than usual. He walked rapidly into his study, thrust to the door, and having vehemently poked the low fire together, heaped on more fuel, and turned up his reading lamp—all with a kind of strange nervous haste—he threw himself into the heavy oak chair which stood before his library table, and began diving into an envelope-case in search of writing

materials. There was a dark flush on his cheek as he stooped to examine the lock of the case, which in his desperate hurry he had been very near hampering.

“‘Past hope, past cure, past help,’” he muttered to himself, quoting half aloud the passionate words which, uttered by a voice of liquid sweetness, had brought swift tears to many eyes that very night. “Just so it is, with both of us! What is the use of this pretence of endurance? I have no mind to endure any longer. Why should I persist in keeping up this ghastly silence which is suffocating me, weighing upon every energy like lead—and probably killing *her* by inches? My darling! she thought—beautiful little heroic spirit that she is!—that she could live without word or sign, content in the knowledge that she was doing her duty, as she conceives of duty. I was almost glamourised into thinking it possible too. But it is not possible; and by this time she will have found that out for herself.”

Certainly play-going had not produced a happy or healthy effect on Wentworth’s mind that night, though perhaps it would hardly be fair to charge his reckless mood entirely upon the performance of “Romeo and Juliet” that he had

witnessed. There was another disturbing element at work: the knowledge that his brother was about to become a guest in Muriel Ferrars' home, and that while he himself remained debarred from all intercourse with her, Philip was to spend every hour of the next few days in her intimate society. The more he dwelt upon and realized it, the more intolerable did such an idea appear to him. Though he would hardly have confessed as much to himself, it was this consideration which above all else had determined him to cast honour and scruple to the winds, and to write the letter he had solemnly engaged never to write. He was firmly assured that Muriel's love for himself was not of the order that dies easily, and he was perfectly well persuaded that his own powers of fascination were to his half-brother's as sunlight unto moonlight; therefore he had only to put out his hand to make sure of keeping fast the heart he had already won. And Wentworth was not the man to deny himself this decisive touch, and withdraw his influence—in order to leave the field open for Philip, should he care to contest it. Compassion, resolution, consideration of possible consequences, respect even for his own plighted word were alike swept away by the

incoming tide of a passion which, even when it is prospective only, is veritably cruel as the grave.

He began to write; and, half beside himself as he was for the moment, he yet retained enough of his characteristic shrewdness and practical sense to remember that it was necessary not to startle Muriel, or shock her moral sense too rudely. There were many things which he might have ventured to say to her, could he have added the witchery of voice and glance to his words, which he dared not set down in black and white on a sheet of paper.

It is needless to transcribe what Wentworth wrote. Since no eye but his own ever beheld that letter, its contents are best left to moulder in obscurity. It was a long letter, apparently diffuse, yet in reality full of point and meaning; and throughout it there prevailed a tone of friendly affection veiling an undertone of profounder and less-disciplined feeling. Only towards the close, when entreating the girl to answer what he had written, did he put aside for a moment the mask of friendship, and that to resume it again as he signed his name. "*Ever your friend, Paul Wentworth*"—so the letter ended.

He had written rapidly, rarely pausing to weigh his sentences, and giving himself no time for reflection till the last word was reached. Then he took the closely written sheets and read them deliberately through, and as he read, many and varied were the changeful expressions that flitted across his face ; until at last all concentrated in a smile of triumph—apparent rather in the eyes than upon the lips—which Philip Irvine would have been perfectly justified in describing as “unhallowed.” With this gleam of triumph still lighting his features, Wentworth folded his letter and placed it in an envelope : then he bent to direct it. “*Miss Ferrars,*” he wrote—and stopped suddenly.

What had arrested him ? A mere memory, a shadowy recollection, the echo of a past appeal. Something recalled to him vividly the remembrance of Muriel as he had seen her last, with her face raised and her hands wrung together in pathetic, childlike entreaty : “Have a little pity ! Don’t make it so hard for me to do right !” He pushed the letter from him, and got up. For the first time that night he realized fully what he was doing, and what manner of man he was for doing it.

He realized this at last, but his determination

was not necessarily altered in consequence. He had so often outraged and defied his better instincts, and so often yielded to his baser ones, that the nobler part of him had grown weak and nerveless, unfit to contend with the headstrong impulses which should have been its slaves. Still he hesitated; there was something gained already. He unfolded his letter, and read it again; and when he reached the end, he frowned. "Her friend," he said between his teeth. "My God, what a friend!"

But he did not tear up the letter. He put it carefully into a drawer of his writing-table, to be reconsidered on the morrow; then he dropped into an armchair by the fireplace and lay back staring into the glowing embers. So absorbed was he in his unquiet meditations that a sound of light hurrying footsteps in the hall, followed by the cautious turning of the study door-handle, passed by him altogether unheeded.

The door opened swiftly and noiselessly. Who was this? An angel descended to warn or threaten? No, no angel; only his little daughter Estelle in her long white dressing-gown, with her chestnut hair flying loose over her shoulders, and her dark eyes bright with love and merriment.

"Stella, my darling!" exclaimed Wentworth, springing to his feet. "What's the matter? Are you ill, dear?"

"Never was better in my life," protested Stella mischievously. "I came down to bid you good night."

"To bid me good night?" Wentworth replied in amazement. "And it is past one in the morning now"—glancing at the clock. "What on earth made you do this, child?"

"What on earth made you walk off without coming upstairs as you promised?" demanded Miss Estelle. "What do you think you deserve for that?"

"My darling," said Wentworth penitently, taking her in his arms, "I know it was shameful of me to forget. But I was hurried and—and annoyed. Now, Stella, did I ever forget before?"

"No, you never did," Stella admitted, leaning her head lovingly on his shoulder. "Still, it was very unkind of you to forget to-day. Mab and I sat in the dark waiting and waiting, and I told her I heard the hall door shut and she wouldn't believe me—and then when mother and Uncle Philip came out of the drawing-room, we found you had been gone ever so long!"

Wentworth stooped and kissed her. "I can-

not tell you how sorry I am!" he said. "If there were anything I could do to make up to both of you——"

"You can't make up for what is over," said Stella with unconscious philosophy. "Did you recollect about it after you were gone?"

Wentworth flushed a little. He had remembered nothing of the children that evening until the moment of Stella's sudden appearance. "No, I'm afraid I did not," he answered guiltily. "You see, I was attending to other things."

"Then it is just as I thought," said Stella. She spoke mournfully, and made at the same time a movement to withdraw herself from her father's arms.

"What do you think, dear?" he inquired, quietly holding her fast. "And what are these, Stella? Tears? Why, darling, you are not surely going to make a trouble out of my stupid piece of forgetfulness?"

"It isn't—altogether that," Stella answered, choking down a lump in her throat.

"What is it, then?" asked Wentworth, drawing her close to his breast and smoothing down the tangled chestnut locks.

"It is only," said Stella, clinging to him again, and bravely repressing the tears which were in

some measure the outcome of over-fatigue and long watching, "only that I was afraid—since you went away—that you weren't *quite* so fond of us as you used to be."

"My little star, what an absurd notion! Put it out of your head, dear, once and for all. Has any one said anything to give you such an idea? Because if so——"

"No—oh no!" Stella interrupted. "It was all my own fancy. I haven't even told Mab."

"It was indeed only your own fancy, you silly child. I shall not tell you that I love you better than before, because that is not possible—but you may rest assured that it is equally impossible for me to love you less. Are you satisfied? Then that's all right. But how cold you are, little one! Come to the fire and get warmed."

"What a splendid fire you've got!" sighed Stella in ineffable content, crouching over the blaze. "And really I am awfully cold."

Wentworth took a fur-lined travelling rug that was lying on a neighbouring sofa and wrapped his little daughter up in it. "There! that's better!" he said. "No wonder you are cold, if you have been sitting up all these hours waiting for me."

"I haven't been up all the while. Dickinson

would have found me out, and there would have been no end of a row! I stayed in bed listening till I heard you come in."

"And Mabel—was she awake too?"

"She tried to keep awake at first, but she couldn't," answered Stella scornfully. "Mab is a dreadful baby about going to sleep."

"Well, perhaps she was the more sensible of the two on this occasion," said Wentworth, but the smile and caress he bestowed on Stella nullified any implied reproof in his words. "Didn't you find it hard to keep awake yourself?"

"No, indeed! When I had once thought of it, I couldn't have gone to sleep without seeing you."

Wentworth smiled again. "Why didn't you come down sooner, by the way?" he asked. "I have been in more than an hour—at least, I believe so." Something smote him inwardly as he recollected how the hour had been employed.

"It was that horrid Élise. She was sitting up for mother, you know, with a novel to read, and I suppose it was a very exciting one, for she didn't fall asleep directly, as she generally does, and I dared not pass the door till she dropped off, because she has a sort of spite against us children,

and she would have rushed in to Miss Lawson in a moment. That's what made me so cold."

"Poor little star!" said Wentworth tenderly. "What would Miss Lawson say if she could see you now, I wonder?" He had relapsed into his fireside chair again, and Stella had perched herself on an arm of it, where she sat luxuriously warming her feet, with one arm about her father's neck to steady herself.

"What indeed?" she cried, with a ripple of laughter. "Or mother—or Dickinson? You're a stern father, and know how to keep your family in excellent order, don't you?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't know much about it, or my family would not venture to take such liberties."

"Ah, well! you may talk," said Stella, "but you know you were very glad to see me all the same!"

"That may be," returned Wentworth rather sadly. "I dare say I was foolish; I often am." And Stella's quick ear caught the sound of a stifled sigh.

She turned swiftly round upon him. "Father, are you tired?"

"A little, dear."

"You often look tired now; you have always

been tired ever since you went abroad. That holiday didn't do you one scrap of good."

"Perhaps not," Wentworth admitted.

"I'm sure it didn't. You haven't been a bit like yourself ever since, and I can see two lines here"—drawing her finger across his forehead—"which I never saw before."

"That's advancing age," replied Wentworth, with an effort at gaiety of manner. "We must all grow old some time or other, Stella *mia*. You will be a woman in no time yourself."

Stella shook her head. "That's a long way off. I'm only twelve, and it's an immense while to wait."

"Don't be too anxious to grow up," said Wentworth earnestly. "I prefer you as you are."

"Well, that's a consolation, at any rate," said the child. "But I should love to grow up, all the same. Now, if I had been grown up, you would have let me go to Switzerland with you, and I should have liked that so! Oh, father"—laying her soft cheek caressingly against his—"I do wish you would have taken me!"

"I wish to Heaven I had!" Wentworth answered with sudden vehemence.

Stella looked at him in momentary astonishment, and then—as if vaguely conscious that his

words were the outcome of some feeling which it was beyond her power to fathom—she replied simply, “Well, it’s over now, so there’s no use my wishing; only you must really take me next time,” and refrained from any further remark. But in instinctive sympathy she slipped one hand into her father’s, and gently stroked his hair with the other.

“Well, Miss Impertinence,” Wentworth said at length, rousing himself from the abstraction into which he had sunk after his unguarded exclamation, “what are you about now? Searching for grey hairs to match those newly discovered wrinkles?”

“I never used such an odious word,” exclaimed Stella, with an indignant embrace. “Wrinkles, indeed! As if you were an old bent man like Sir George Carmichael! I said lines.”

“Lines, then, if you like that better. How about the grizzled locks, eh?”

“There isn’t one,” Stella returned triumphantly. “Not a single white thread! And your hair’s just as curly as possible, and ever so thick besides.”

“That is a comfort, at any rate,” rejoined Wentworth lightly, “because you are so candid that I feel sure you would tell me if the white

threads were there. See what it is to have a really frank daughter to point out one's growing infirmities! And now, darling, if you are tolerably warm, I must send you away, or we shall both get into a terrible scrape with the authorities."

Stella pouted a little, and rose unwillingly from her perch. "You might have let me stay a little longer," she murmured. "I don't think I'd go now, if I wasn't so dreadfully sleepy. But you're tired too, so I won't tease you any more. Good night, father darling."

"Good night, my Stella. Remember," he added, following her to the door, and shaking his head warningly at her as she paused to wave to him from the stairs, "your midnight excursion is pardoned this once, but 'it must not occur again.'"

"Mustn't it?" retorted Stella saucily. "Then look to your own ways and manners, sir! Every time you behave as you have behaved to-day, I shall appear to take vengeance upon you; and next time I won't let you off so easily! Good night."

Wentworth watched the small flying figure until it disappeared from view; then he turned back into the study, and double-locked the door

behind him. How he spent the next two hours it is impossible to say; but among the ashes which lay cold the next morning in the study fireplace was a heap of charred paper—the fragments of his letter to Muriel Ferrars.





CHAPTER VI.

“THE SILENCE THAT CAME NEXT.”

What do we give to our beloved?
A little faith, all undisproved . . .
And bitter memories, to make
The whole earth blasted for our sake.”

E. B. BROWNING.

ALDERTON COMMON was in all the glory of its July dress again. The blue-green of its innumerable juniper bushes and the golden-brown of its waving bracken contrasted as harmoniously as they had done a year before; its tall firs stood up solemnly and majestically as ever against a sky blue as indigo, flecked here and there with little transparent clouds which only threw into more striking relief the hue of the great crystalline vault in which they floated; the sunbeams danced just as merrily among the leaves of the great elms before the Manor House; and, as in former days, Muriel Ferrars sat in the shade of the pines, reading.

Or rather, seeming to read ; mechanically, almost unconsciously, retracing with her eyes the words of a single paragraph in the newspaper that lay upon her knee :—

"It is announced that the newly constituted office of Counsel for the Crown in International Causes is to be filled immediately by the appointment of Mr. Wentworth, Q.C., whose eminent services to this country, as legal representative of Great Britain at the recent Conference on International Law, have lately been so universally and cordially acknowledged." Simple words, easily mastered ; easy of comprehension, too, the fact which they conveyed. Yet Muriel read and re-read them repeatedly, dwelling with reluctant fascination on every syllable.

For Wentworth had been perfectly correct in his confident assumption at their parting interview. Muriel had not forgotten ; and she was beginning to doubt whether she should ever be able to forget.

Nevertheless, she had not yielded tamely and unresistingly to the memories which held her an unwilling captive, and which, strangle and crush them as she would, obstinately refused to die the death. None save herself knew how

many hours of lonely and desperate wrestling with her own heart, how many secret tears and prayers and vehement self-reproaches, the past nine months had witnessed. But so far her labour seemed to have been in vain. Although she reminded herself with shuddering fear a dozen times a day that the very thought of the man who had stolen her love was a sin ; although she endeavoured honestly to stifle every lingering recollection of the words he had said, and to silence utterly the intense longing for one moment's sight of his face, one single sound of his voice, which came upon her at times like a paroxysm of actual pain ;—although she had done all this for nearly a year past, she was scarcely nearer peace or freedom than on the day when Paul Wentworth bade her farewell among the Swiss mountains.

She had not forgotten ; but she knew that possibly—probably indeed, considering the kind of man he was known to be, and even confessed himself to be—she had by this time passed from Wentworth's recollection as completely as if she had never existed. She had often tried to rouse her pride by means of this recollection, and sometimes succeeded in the attempt for a while ; but in the end a more potent feeling

always proved too strong for pride. No ; Muriel had not forgotten, could not forget.

The lapse of time had, of course, dulled to a certain extent the poignancy of her mental suffering. The sharp agony of a wound new made had given place to the ceaseless aching of that which is perpetual and refuses to heal ; and the latter pain, if easier to bear without outcry or complaint, is also the more hopeless. At first Muriel's young nature, utterly unused to suffering, writhed rebelliously under the torturing misery of her mortal hurt ; she could have cried out against the world and all in it, almost against Providence itself, for the fate that had been meted out to her, for the unbearable wretchedness of her lot. Why had this “so bitter cup been brimmed for her” ? During the first few weeks that followed her parting with Wentworth, any one—certainly any woman—less purblind in such matters than Mrs. Erskine, must have seen, despite all Muriel's determined efforts to conceal what she felt, that the springs of the girl's nature were out of gear, and that she who had formerly enjoyed life so freely and frankly now looked upon it and all its manifestations with an intolerant impatience bordering hard upon disgust. But Mrs. Erskine could see

nothing, and whatever the Professor saw he kept to himself. For some unexplained reason, however, he prolonged his stay abroad long beyond the term he had originally fixed for it, and he insisted on Muriel's remaining with him and his wife. Therefore by the time that she returned amid rain and fogs and fallen leaves to the home she had left in the full glow of summer, the primary shock of the catastrophe that had overtaken her was over. Her grief was fast becoming a settled and regular part of her life, instead of a horrible surprise, as strange as it was cruel; her very conflict with herself was growing into a daily and necessary part of her existence—and this made it all the easier to take up the part she had set herself to play, and to induce those about her to believe that the former Muriel had come back to them, when in reality it was a sad and sorely wounded creature having little in common with that bright fanciful girl except her name.

Her friends were on the whole rather unobservant people, and she succeeded passably well in her pitiful enterprise. There were two persons, however, whom she did not altogether manage to deceive. One of these was her sister Lucy, whose naturally sharp wits were quickened by

strong affection, and who saw through Muriel's affectation of high spirits and detected the false ring in her animated narratives of travel and adventure before the first evening was over. Something was wrong, she perceived ; but what, puzzled her. Girl-like, she immediately attributed the mysterious change of which she was conscious to a love affair ; but she was utterly baffled when she tried to discover the lover's identity. After questioning Muriel closely—and receiving ready answers to her questions, Muriel seeming to have nothing to conceal—it appeared to Lucy that her sister had met no one who could possibly have enacted the part of a lover at all, since Muriel took good care to put Wentworth outside the range of her calculations from the very beginning.

The first time Lucy mentioned his name, she said carelessly, “Oh yes! and, by-the-by, I believe I never wrote to you that he was not a widower, as I incorrectly stated at first.”

“Worse and worse!” said Lucy. “A widower would have been better than nothing, though you *have* an objection to widowers. Did you see his wife?”

“No; he said she was in Scotland,” answered Muriel calmly. “But we met some people in

Venice who knew her, and told us she was a good deal admired in London. She cannot be quite young, of course, for they have children growing up—she was a Miss Carew, I believe.”

“You liked him, didn’t you?”

“Yes. He was very good-natured to me in many ways, and he is exceedingly clever—a man of really brilliant intellect. Uncle Alec thinks him quite a paragon.” And there the subject had dropped.

So Lucy was sorely perplexed, and could not tell what to think. Although she watched Muriel with the acuteness of a lynx and the wistfulness of a faithful dog for weeks, still no solution of the mystery presented itself. At length, having one day surprised her sister sitting in the dark with flushed cheeks and suspiciously wet eyes, she demanded boldly to know what was the matter. But she obtained no satisfaction. For the first time in her life Muriel gave way to a fit of unreasoning anger, and requested sharply to be left in peace. There was nothing the matter, she asseverated; she was perfectly well, and if she had an idea which troubled her, surely she possessed a right to her ideas like other people? If Lucy wanted her to be like herself, she must leave her to

forget in her own way—poor Muriel! who had just asserted that there was nothing really amiss—and not insist on her talking about things she wished never to think of again. Lucy retired discomfited, but certainly not reassured, with no option but to resume her task of silent vigilance in much heaviness of spirit.

The other person who noticed the great change that had passed over Muriel was Jack Arlingham. He was not so keenly alive to it as Lucy, but he was vaguely conscious of it, and it made him desperately uncomfortable. It was borne in upon him daily by the utter indifference which Muriel displayed to his comings and goings, to his attentions or to the absence of such acts of homage on his part. Before she went to Switzerland he had often been aware that she was checking him and keeping him at a distance; but now she seemed absolutely careless as to what he said or did, and remained so cool and abstracted after his most significant speeches that he frequently doubted whether she could have heard him or rightly understood his drift. This strange indifference stung the young man's pride, and fanned his lukewarm passion into a white heat of flame. He tried to soften his princess by

tenderness, and when this attempt failed signally, to pique her into jealousy by suddenly withdrawing his homage and ostentatiously offering it at other shrines; but all his strata-gems were alike unsuccessful—nothing appeared to move Muriel. Wrapped in her own sorrowful dream, Jack Arlingham had scarcely more than a phantom existence for her. She still lived in the moral shadow of remembrance, and it made her surroundings so dark that all personalities, save one, seemed like the airy figures of a passing phantasmagoria, destitute of reality and human interest. If she observed them at all, it was to reflect contemptuously—

“Look upon this picture and on that,”

as she compared them with that wandering star, the perilous brilliancy of whose baleful rays had made poor farthing rushlights of all other men to her dazzled eyes. So Jack, too, knew not what to think; but, being after his own peculiar fashion very much in love, and of a naturally phlegmatic and unexcitable temperament, he was fain to bide his time and hope for better days.

Thus the winter had passed away. It was always a quiet and dull season at Alderton, and there had been little, while it lasted, to distract

Muriel from her brooding over the story of the past summer; but with longer days and brighter sunshine Holmshire awoke into renewed social as well as natural life, and it became incumbent on her to go forth and take her part in the picnics, lawn-tennis parties, afternoon dances, and other mild merrymakings of the season. To Lucy's surprise and satisfaction, she threw herself as heartily into these innocent pastimes as even that affectionate little maiden could desire; indeed, she seemed almost unduly engrossed by them, and quite feverishly anxious not to miss appearing at any gathering that took place within twenty miles round. In reality she was making a desperate attempt to throw off the incubus that had weighed on her so long, and she knew that if she were to succeed, it could only be at the cost of long and sustained effort. Oftentimes, just when she was ready to congratulate herself on having achieved her undertaking, some passing trifle would ruffle the hidden depths of bitter recollection, and the work was all to do over again.

It was thus with her on this July day. The sight of Wentworth's name in the columns of the *Times* had carried her back to the past she had been trying to forget, and the old pain

seemed as fresh and keen as ever. Like every sorely tried and tempted soul, Muriel had her dark moments—moments when to walk uprightly no longer seems the chief good, and the limiting ordinances of life are felt to be cruelly narrow and galling past endurance. This was one of those moments. She was tempted to regret her determined refusal to receive those letters with which, something whispered, she might have solaced her sick heart even now. After all, what had she gained by such refusal? Had she forgotten Wentworth the sooner; and could she answer for it that she had not driven him into deeper and more reckless evil-doing? Better possibly had it been for both, had she been strong enough and brave enough to rise above what he had—perhaps rightly—called mere conventional scruples.

But she was too clear-sighted to let herself be long blinded by such sophistries. If she had not conquered her love for Wentworth, she had at least refrained from indulging it: this much she had gained personally. And was there much likelihood that she would have roused Wentworth's nobler self by joining him in a fresh course of wrong-doing? She thrust the insidious regret from her.

Still her burden remained unlightened. Never had it felt more intolerably heavy. It seemed to her that it would have been well could she have died that day among the hills when she had so narrowly missed dying—died after she knew Wentworth loved her, and before she knew anything more. Poor, passionate, clinging heart! it could not endure even in imagination the thought of foregoing that knowledge which was the source of all its suffering. If by a wish Muriel could have annihilated the actual past, and created a new past without a Wentworth and a present unconscious of his very existence, it is doubtful whether she would have done it. Human nature is prone to the self-contradictory and the paradoxical, and it may be that she loved her sorrow even while she wrestled with it.

On this particular day she was not wrestling with it very earnestly. Even the bravest spirit and the most inured to pain will falter and fail sometimes, and Muriel was yet but a novice in the school of endurance and self-discipline. When—as now—she gave the rein to memory, and remained deliberately passive while her thoughts

“Went slipping back upon the golden days
In which she saw him first”—

she knew well that she was by such self-indulgence only preparing fresh suffering for herself—so true is it that on the smallest deviation from the path of absolute right the unfailing avenger waits—yet she yielded for this once to the temptation. She felt so forlorn and hopeless that she snatched frantically at the mere recollection of a time when the world and everything in it wore such a different aspect—different because in those days

“He seemed so dear, so kind, so true”

—he who had proved himself none of these things in reality!

She was not left long to indulge in her dangerous reverie, for in the midst of it Lucy came flying over the turf, looking like a woodland nymph among the dark pine stems. Her eyes were brighter than usual, and there was a flush of pleasurable excitement on her cheeks.

“I have been searching for you everywhere,” she cried, waving aloft a piece of thin pink paper which looked like a telegram, “and you have been mooning out here the whole afternoon, I dare say.”

“I came out just after luncheon,” answered Muriel, instinctively folding the *Times* with the

paragraph she had been dreaming over inwards, although there was really no reason for hiding it. “I suppose it is getting late.”

“Late? It is past five o’clock! However, I wanted to find you to tell you the news. This telegram is from George: he will be here this evening, and, what is more, Mr. Irvine is coming with him. He says, ‘Expect me by the 6.35 train. Irvine comes with me.’ I am delighted, aren’t you, Muriel?”

Muriel lifted her beautiful grey eyes. They had no lack of expression now, but their chief characteristic was a pathetic wistfulness, as of a soul looking out on a world full of sorrow and perplexity. “I shall be very glad to have George back,” she said in her soft weary voice, which had marvellously little gladness in it; “but who is Mr. Irvine, that you should be so delighted at the prospect of his advent?”

“Do you mean to say that you have forgotten all about him? Why, George talked of no one else all last Christmas vacation; and, besides, don’t you remember my telling you when you came back from Italy that he was to have stayed with us last autumn, and then at the last moment an epidemic of smallpox broke out in Bethnal Green, and he would not leave the poor

people at such a time? You are dreadful about forgetting things; you used not to have such a bad memory."

"I remember now; but I did not recollect the name at first. He is the Fellow of St. Bride's who gives up all his vacations to work in the East End, is he not?"

"Of course he is. I should have thought you would have been wild with excitement at the prospect of seeing such a man—he is just the kind of person to suit your high-flown ideas of perfection. I don't profess to be a hero-worshipper myself; I think so-called heroes are much like other men as a rule when you come to look at them closely. But I can't help respecting Mr. Irvine. He lives his heroism, while most people take theirs out in talk."

"It must be a very self-denying life," responded Muriel. She had accorded a kind of superficial attention to Lucy while pursuing inwardly the train of thought that her sister had interrupted, and as Lucy seemed to expect her to say something, she spoke. But her manner betrayed her want of interest in the subject.

"I should think it was self-denying! Giving up every pleasure and comfort in life for such distasteful, thankless work—at his age, too; for

George told me he is only about seven and twenty. I always thought you would fall in love with him at first sight, Muriel ; but as you are so very cool about him, I'm not sure I will not think of him for myself. Only he would probably want *me* to go about the slums with baskets and tracts, and I'm afraid I am hardly suitable for the place.”

Muriel did not answer. She was still absorbed in the visions she had conjured up.

“Don't you remember,” pursued Lucy, warming to her subject, which evidently inspired her with secret enthusiasm, “what George told us of his marvellous power over the rough gutter children : how, when nobody else could do anything with a child, Mr. Irvine could keep it orderly and happy ; and how he quelled that riot among the lads at the gin distillery, and then—when the uproar was over, and he had persuaded the ringleaders to give themselves up to the authorities—how he went in and prayed with the boy who was so badly injured, and tended him just like a woman ? Muriel ! you're not listening !”

No, she was not listening ; at least, not to Lucy's innocent chatter. Her ears were full of the echoes of a voice it were better for her never to have heard—but Lucy's tart exclamation of

impatience put the whole fantasy of her imagination finally to flight. She flushed to the roots of her hair.

"Indeed, I am very sorry," she said penitently "I was thinking of something else for the minute. You were talking about Mr. Irvine, weren't you? Just tell me again what you said, if you don't mind."

Lucy, who was sweet-tempered and easily mollified, was not slow to comply with the request; and Muriel was a carefully attentive listener to her second-hand narratives of Philip Irvine's achievements until such time as that gentleman himself actually appeared on the scene.

CHAPTER VII.

PHILIP IRVINE BECOMES UNEASY.

“There is no love
Like that wherewith we love who works us ill
And wounds us to the quick.”

CHRISTINA M. ROSSETTI.

MURIEL'S earliest impression of her brother's friend and tutor was not a particularly favourable one, and when the first evening of his stay came to an end, she found little to say in his praise. He struck her as hard, cold, and self-sufficient; narrow and dogmatic in his views and opinions, and far too dictatorial in his manner of giving them to the world. The sharp fashion in which he had set Lucy right once or twice during dinner had not commended itself to her sister's ideas of courtesy. Then he appeared to touch life at so few points that it was difficult to come into mental contact with him; and there was something repellent in his lack of sympathy

for all that forms the staple interest of ordinary lives. No, Muriel professed small enthusiasm for George's hero and chief.

Lucy, on the other hand—possibly out of sheer opposition—protested that she liked him excessively. He evidently knew his own mind, and had the courage of his opinions—two excellent qualities, to begin with. She did not object to his brusque manner; and as to the monotony of expression which Muriel considered to detract so greatly from his otherwise undoubted good looks, she rather admired it. After this promising beginning, Muriel began to hope that the task of entertaining Mr. Irvine would be mainly taken off her hands.

She allowed herself, therefore, to linger as long as she felt inclined over her housekeeping duties next morning, and it was nearly midday when she betook herself to the tent pitched on the stretch of grass behind the house, which served as a kind of summer drawing-room. Philip Irvine, craving fresh air and sunlight after the stifling courts and alleys of Bethnal-green, had established himself there with his correspondence directly after breakfast.

The pile of letters was not completed when Muriel entered the tent; but the writer had

laid aside his pen and was giving his attention partly to a portfolio full of sketches, which lay open before him on the table, and partly to Lucy, who stood beside him offering marginal comments. Muriel felt sure that they were busy with the mementoes of her ill-starred travels, and coloured with annoyance which she dared not express. The Italian sketches, with which at least no personal recollections were associated, lay uppermost—she could only hope that Mr. Irvine would not proceed beyond these. When he reached the last of the series, she ventured to interpose. “I am sure you must have seen enough of my poor little daubs by now; and if you want your letters to go by the first post, Mr. Irvine, you have very little time to spare. The bag will leave in half an hour.”

“Thank you,” replied Irvine quietly, retaining the drawings, “but my letters are none of them pressing ones. So long as they go to-day, I need not be particular about a post. I hope you will let me look at the rest of these, Miss Ferrars; I see we are in Switzerland now, where I feel more at home. I have never been in Italy.”

Muriel had no choice but to submit. Irvine continued to examine the sketches with exasperating deliberation, making a remark now and

then, which was sometimes critical and sometimes laudatory.

"This is really very pretty!" he exclaimed, looking at a drawing of the Bristenstock—"the prettiest bit of your work I have seen yet. The light and shade is most skilfully managed, and those trees in the foreground are drawn in quite a masterly way. It is a very clever bit of draughtsmanship indeed."

So it was: but it was not Muriel's work. A stronger and more practised hand than hers had sketched it in, just as a more experienced eye than hers had directed that skilful management of light and shade which kindled Mr. Irvine's admiration. Much as she dreaded the inferences Lucy might not unnaturally draw, Muriel could not take to herself the praise which was rightly Wentworth's. "I was helped with that sketch," she answered as carelessly as she could. "That is the reason it is so much better done than the rest."

Lucy gave her a rapid glance. A few months earlier, the child would have asked boldly, "Who helped you?" trusting to the stranger's presence to ensure her obtaining a reply. But she had had a lesson, and wisely refrained from any observation.

"I think your Swiss sketches are decidedly the best, take them all in all," Irvine remarked, with the calm judicial air of which Muriel had already expressed disapproval. "I see they are confined to the neighbourhood of the Lake of Lucerne."

"Yes. My uncle and aunt, with whom I went abroad, did not care to move about. We spent a whole month at the Hôtel Mythen, a little mountain hotel on the Axenstrasse. The scenery is just at its grandest there, I think."

A very curious expression came into Philip Irvine's face. He looked startled and troubled—almost frightened; and some question seemed to be upon his lips, which he resolutely checked.

"It is indeed—it is very beautiful," he replied. "What time of the year did you say you were there?" he asked presently, still studying the little sketch before him.

Muriel was too much perturbed herself to notice her interlocutor's strange manner. "We went in August," she answered, "and we stayed till the end of the first week in September, and we had lovely weather nearly all the time. We were very fortunate."

Philip Irvine's expression was more remarkable than ever, but he still said nothing; having opportunely recollected that he was bound to

say nothing—bound by his promise made nine months before. Neither could he ask anything for his own satisfaction, except by practising deception either actively or passively. So he remained silent, and went on looking at the drawings; but he made no further comments on any of them.

When he reached the last of the portfolio's contents, Muriel interposed again. "Don't trouble to put those things back, Mr. Irvine—I want to rearrange them. Will you kindly hand me the case? Thank you."

"Thank you for allowing me to see them," he answered courteously, and then resumed his discarded pen.

Lucy threw herself into a low cushioned basket-chair, and picked up a newspaper; Muriel remained at the end of the table furthest from Irvine, and slowly began her task of sorting and arranging. It was growing very hot, and there was an intense stillness and silence in the tent, broken only by the scratching of Irvine's pen, the buzzing of the flies, and the occasional tinkle of a distant sheep bell in the park or on the common. For fully five minutes no one spoke, and then Lucy's voice was suddenly heard from behind the broad sheets of the *Times*.

"Muriel, I wonder if this is your friend who has been appointed British member of the International Commission?"

Philip Irvine looked up from his writing just in time to see the girl opposite him quiver as if she had received an electric shock. But in a second she had regained her self-command, and though her lips were still white, her voice was quite steady as she rejoined, with a slight intonation of astonishment and rebuke, "What did you say, Lucy?"

Lucy interpreted Muriel's tone to mean that she had used too great freedom of speech before a comparative stranger. She therefore asked again in more carefully chosen terms, "Is this Mr. Wentworth who has been appointed International Counsel the man you met in Switzerland?"

"Very likely," returned Muriel. (Afterwards she asked herself why on earth she had not said "Yes" simply?) "He was an eminent lawyer. Uncle Alec said he was quite a leading man at the Bar."

Philip Irvine looked relieved, and the tension of his features relaxed a little.

"I dare say it is the same, then," Lucy remarked serenely. "What was his christian name?"

“His christian name? Paul.”

“Then it is the same: there can’t be more than one distinguished *Paul* Wentworth, I am sure. Quite a celebrity he seems to be; you ought to feel proud of knowing him. Here’s his parentage, and history, and all the rest of it, if you want to read it.” She tossed the paper to her sister, who was glad to accept it without comment, and added in an explanatory tone to Irvine: “This Mr. Wentworth was staying in the same hotel on the Lake of Lucerne, so my sister saw a good deal of him.”

Philip Irvine returned no reply to this remark. He was a very high-minded young man, no doubt, but at that moment he was in a silent tempest of passion with his brother for having placed him in so false and anomalous a position, and, remembering the look in Miss Ferrars’ face a few minutes earlier, he felt that he probably did well to be angry. But although he was filled with no ordinary measure of dismay and shame and burning indignation, his personal resentment was temporarily his overmastering sensation. That he, Philip Irvine, should be so fettered by a rash and unguarded promise wrung from him by another, as to be forced into playing a part! He rose, in order to put an

end to a conversation which was becoming intolérable to him.

"My letters will be in time after all, I think," he said, "and if you are inclined to undertake that expedition to the farm you planned for me"—addressing Lucy—"I am quite at your service."

("Whatever may have happened in Switzerland to account for Miss Ferrars' extraordinary agitation just now," he reflected, "the little one knows nothing of it." Somehow this idea was peculiarly pleasant to him.)

Lucy sprang to her feet with alacrity. "There will be time enough to show you our agricultural lions before luncheon," she said, "such as they are. My father rather prides himself on his home farm: I dare say we shall find him down there now. Will you come too, Muriel?"

No, Muriel would not go. She had a headache, and the sun was too hot for walking. Irvine gave her a sharp look, but did not press her to alter her decision.

By the time he reached his destination he had in some measure reasoned himself out of his anxiety. Since Miss Ferrars had been under her uncle and aunt's care in Switzerland, it was highly improbable that Paul should have had

any chance of trifling with her affections—"even were he so basely cruel as to wish to do so, which I can scarcely bring myself to believe," Irvine added in his own mind. Most likely his brother had simply made himself agreeable, as the worldly phrase went; and Miss Ferrars, being a silly, fanciful girl, ignorant of the world or knowing it only through the medium of foolish novels, had chosen to weave for herself a romance which was something worse than silly out of slender materials—that is to say, if her passing agitation had been real, and not (as he was almost inclined to hope) the effect of his own suspicious imagination. Yet in that case how explain Paul's mysterious request? It was a curious and unpleasant riddle, not to be solved by any amount of cogitation—so Irvine resolutely put aside his uncomfortable speculations and gave his whole attention to the bright talk of his companion, "the little one."

If he could have seen and heard what was passing in the tent half an hour later, he might have thought that he had allowed his apprehensions to be too easily pacified.

Muriel stood, white but resolute, by the table, leaning one hand upon it as if for support; and opposite her stood Jack Arlingham, wearing an

expression curiously compounded in about equal proportions of admiration, annoyance, and a kind of dogged obstinacy. Perhaps the obstinacy preponderated slightly over the other ingredients.

"It is that miserable journey abroad which has done this," Arlingham was saying wrathfully. "But for that journey, you would have given me a different answer."

"I think not," Muriel answered faintly. "I cannot tell now."

"After all, why let it stand between us?" he asked more gently. "A mere fancy of a few weeks, which you yourself say is at an end—and I have loved you for years! Can't you put away the remembrance of this man, whoever he may be, who it seems had not even the grace to care for you——"

She interrupted him. "He did!" she cried, the words breaking from her involuntarily. She was speaking more to herself than to Arlingham.

"Then I don't understand you," said the young man with a touch of sullenness.

"No," she answered, with such a passion of pain in her voice that if he had had a little more sensibility—which being interpreted means a little less selfishness—in him, he must for pity's

sake have ceased to question and importune her ; “ of course you cannot understand me. No one can, no one ever will. I have never told any one of—of this before ; I only told you, when you asked if it was so, because I wanted you to see how impossible it must always be—the thing you wish. It is impossible ; quite, quite impossible ! ”

Certainly, after three years of hesitation and procrastination, Jack Arlingham had been ill advised in his choice of a day and hour for making his declaration of love. But he would not acknowledge himself defeated. The more Muriel resisted him, the more bent he grew on winning her.

“ Then you do care for him still,” he said slowly, with a hard, almost a cruel look on his young face. “ You expect him to come back to you some day.”

Muriel’s eyes flashed. “ You were my old friend,” she exclaimed indignantly ; “ I have humbled myself to you that I might not seem harsh or ungrateful, and this is my reward ! You may well say that you do not understand. It was all a mistake, a terrible mistake ; I expect nothing, now or at any time. I never wish to see him again, and I never shall. It is all over—

gone and past and done with." Her voice shook a little on the last words.

Arlingham looked abashed. "But in that case, why should everything else be impossible? You have told me about it, which was very good of you. Now forget it—and oh, Muriel, say you'll be my wife all the same."

"I cannot," she replied, with a weary sigh at his persistence. "I have told you that I can never care now for any one—in that way. If you remember that, you will not wish it."

"But I do wish it!" he answered doggedly. "You love me a little now, I think; and after a while you would love me more. I want you—I can't give you up."

Muriel looked at him in silent astonishment. That he should want her without her love—without her soul, as it seemed to her—was a marvel quite beyond her comprehension. He misinterpreted her silence, and pressed his point.

"You do like me a little, Muriel?" he urged anxiously.

"Not a little, Jack—very much," she answered; and there were tears in her eyes, for she was very sorry for him. "You are my dear friend; a sort of brother, only less dear to me than George is. But oh, dear Jack, that kind of

liking is not—love.” She uttered the last word under her breath, as if it were too sacred to be spoken aloud.

She was softened ; she had called him “ dear Jack.” Poor youth ! had he been a little wiser, that kindly form of address might have sufficed to convince him that his hopes of awaking any feeling more tender than friendship in Muriel’s heart were utterly futile. But he was far from wise, and consequently he took courage.

“ I’ll be satisfied with it for the present,” he returned huskily. “ It’s something tangible, though it may not be exactly like your past fancy.”

Her lips curved into a sad and scornful smile. Like her past fancy ! The indulgent, semi-pitying affection she felt for an old playmate whose coming she expected with calmness and whose departure she viewed without poignant regret, whose words were often as so many idle tales to her inattentive ears—like the intoxicating mixture of joy and pain with which she had adored the lover, the very sound of whose step had been sufficient to throw her into a tremor of delight, whose glance thrilled the depths of her heart, and whose most careless utterance had been treasured in the deepest recesses of her

memory and there brooded over with passionate tenderness! She could have laughed at the profound absurdity of the comparison, had not the recollection of those days of delusive happiness filled her with an aching regret too painful for mockery.

"I cannot make you understand," she said wearily. "I am so sorry, so very sorry that this has ever happened, Jack. I tried to make you see how it was, for I wanted to spare you this pain. I am very grateful to you, but it can never be." She was turning from him.

He caught her hand in his, but she drew it from his clasp with a shiver. Had that other man held her hand so? Arlingham wondered with a vengeful frown. Was that the reason why he was not considered worthy to touch it? He had never been so determined to win her as at that moment.

"I will not take your answer now," he said—and in all her life Muriel had never heard him speak in so bold and masterful a tone. "After a love of years I have a right to ask for some indulgence. Take a little time to think about it."

"It will make no difference," she replied, with the air of one who is tired out.

"Still, think of it, Muriel, and let me come for

my answer in a fortnight's time. I am not going to worry and plague you; I shall simply go straight away to Norfolk—you know I told you last week the Lyalls had asked me—and I shall stay there till the time is up. Promise me to think over what I have said, won't you? Remember you are everything to me, and try to put the past out of sight altogether!"

She yielded from sheer weariness of spirit. "I will do it, to please you," she answered sadly, "but I warn you that you are only prolonging this trouble quite uselessly. Nothing can make any difference now."

"Oh yes, something may," Jack replied. "Something will, I think." In his eyes the cause was half gained already.





CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT THE WORLD SAID.

“This sounds as bad as truth.”

SHELLEY.

“MURIEL,” said Mr. Ferrars, putting his handsome grey head in at the drawing-room door one afternoon a few days later, “I want to speak to you for a moment.”

Rather surprised at the summons, the girl rose and went out. Her father greeted her with the complacent smile of one who has an agreeable proposal to make.

“Would you like to go with me to town on Tuesday?” he inquired benevolently.

Muriel answered his question by putting one herself. “Are you going up? I did not know you thought of going.”

“Yes, I have business in the City which it will take me the best part of two days to get through, and I think I shall find it more con-

venient to stay in town till it is done with than to journey up and down several times. It is always best to be on the spot. So I have made up my mind to be away from home three nights, and I will take you with me if you care to go. I shall not be able to do much for you in the daytime; but we might manage some concerts and theatres together. Isn't there a new opera at the Savoy that you haven't seen? And I'll try once again to admire your favourite actor," Mr. Ferrars added heroically, "if your heart is set on the Athenæum, as usual."

A year earlier, such a proposal would have overwhelmed Muriel with delight; now her thanks, if sincere, were very soberly worded. The idea was nevertheless very welcome to her. She was glad of anything to vary the monotony of her life, and she hoped a visit to London might prove more efficacious in distracting her thoughts than the mild excitement of country garden-parties. In addition, she would thus gain a fresh excuse for deferring her promised consideration of Jack Arlingham's cogent arguments. Mr. Ferrars did not find her wanting in gratitude.

She was turning to go back to the room she had left, when an exclamation from her father arrested her. "There is Lucy, you see," he said,

a shade of perplexity gathering on his forehead, "and with Irvine staying here—— What a nuisance this is! I quite forgot the child ought to have some kind of chaperone."

"You forget that Cousin Helen is coming on Monday, father; so she can enact the chaperone, if you think one is needed. But it seems absurd to require a chaperone on account of Mr. Irvine, who is as grave as an archbishop and as severe as a Dominican monk!"

"I don't know about that," returned Mr. Ferrars. "Look there!"

And indeed through the open garden door might be descried the figures of Lucy and Philip Irvine wandering along the shady walks in a desultory fashion, which at a little distance looked suspiciously aimless and loverlike. Muriel laughed softly, and it occurred to Mr. Ferrars that it was long since he had heard her laugh.

"He is only improving her mind, father," she said. "Trying, probably, to induce her to play tennis less, and visit the schools oftener; or taking her to task for her last flippant remark." She laughed again, but the laugh was rather tremulous. There are moments when we all find "how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes," and the sight

of those two strolling contentedly side by side affected Muriel strangely.

If Irvine were really bent only on Lucy's mental and moral improvement, his assiduity in performing his self-imposed task was really beyond all praise. It may be that he was encouraged in his toil by the docility of his pupil, for—contrary to all that might have been expected from so volatile and self-willed a creature—Lucy seemed to enjoy the process of moral education since she had this grave young Oxonian and City missionary for her tutor; and he gradually became so interested in her progress as to be quite ready to give lessons at any and every hour of the day. The oddly contrasted pair had drifted together partly from the force of circumstances. George was frequently absent, Muriel was absorbed in her own troubles and difficulties, and Mr. Ferrars fought shy of his son's friend, whom he styled a transcendental Socialist, so that Lucy was really the only member of the Alderton household available as a constant companion—but, circumstances altogether apart, there was some indefinable attraction in each of these two for the other. Each had strongly marked idiosyncrasies, which nevertheless did not appear to clash; their divergent

characters harmonized in a wholly astonishing manner to those who knew them both even superficially. As Lucy phrased it, "they suited" —yet at first sight nothing more unlikely than their "suiting" could well be imagined. Lucy was careless, pleasure-loving, and impulsive; obstinate and conceited in her fashion of holding fast her crude and often erroneous opinions on all manner of subjects; saucily, sometimes flip-pantly defiant of rigid standards and conventional laws. Could one conceive of a creature less likely to win the admiration of a stern Puritan like Irvine, who abhorred manifestations of feeling, profoundly distrusting all action not founded directly upon principle; who frowned upon self-indulgence in every form, and considered himself as absolutely pledged to a life of voluntary poverty as if he had formally wedded the bride of St. Francis? Yet regard Lucy had undoubtedly won from him, if not absolute and unqualified admiration. I do not offer to explain how this came about. I suspect Philip Irvine could have given no better reason for his preference than the old French philosopher's: '*Si l'on me demandoit pourquoy je l'aymois, je ne peulx que respondre: Parceque c'estoit luy; parceque e'estoit moy.*'

But except by evincing a decided liking for her society, Irvine did little to make Lucy aware of his preference. He still preserved the lofty manner which his little champion called grand and her sister dictatorial; he still interspersed his graver warnings and monitions with merciless strokes of satire aimed at his young disciple's levity, or inconsistency, or downright ignorance of the subjects she affected to discuss, all of which the said disciple took in excellent part, to her family's great astonishment. She was quite convinced of Mr. Irvine's intellectual as well as his moral pre-eminence, and submitted with a good grace to sarcasms which exposed the inherent fallacy of her pet arguments and epigrammatic retorts which set the bystanders laughing at her expense. But, the laugh over, she picked up her fallen arms and renewed the battle, undaunted by defeat, for which evidence of high spirit Irvine liked her none the less well. What pleased him chiefly, however, were the flashes of serious feeling which showed themselves now and again amidst the sparkle and scintillation of the girl's bright wit, the sudden transformation from gay to grave if he introduced any topic demanding real reverence—showing that under all the froth and unrest on the

surface lay hidden the foundation of a true, sweet, and loyal nature. And Lucy, feeling instinctively that she was understood as no one had ever taken the trouble to understand her before, liked her tutor better than ever in consequence.

At any other time Muriel would have been fully alive to all that was passing. But trouble, when we are young, is apt to make us self-absorbed, if not positively selfish, and she was no exception to the general rule in this respect. She scarcely noticed the little drama that was playing itself out under her eyes—or if she saw, she failed to grasp its significance, her prevailing sentiment being one of satisfaction that Lucy and George between them relieved her of all necessity of playing entertainer to Mr. Irvine. She did not dislike him, but he wearied her, like his fellows.

And on his side Irvine felt embarrassed in her presence, his embarrassment being due to his enforced silence on the one subject concerning which he would have liked to question her. His own personal interests had served in great measure to banish the shadow of his half-brother's possible delinquencies from his mind. Still, when Muriel's look at the mention of Paul's

name recurred to him, as it did with annoying persistence from time to time, he was not without misgivings which he would gladly have had set at rest; and these misgivings were intensified by the remembrance of Paul's passionate earnestness in extorting an apparently unimportant promise from himself. He had, however, no choice but to leave them unresolved, since his sense of honour was far too nice to permit of his mentioning Wentworth's name in Muriel's presence without revealing the fact that he was his brother. Were he asked pointblank if he knew him, his answer must be full and explicit—in such a case his promise would necessarily give way to the higher law of common honesty—but otherwise he could find no moral justification for breaking his plighted word, however sorely tempted he might feel to break it. Only he firmly resolved that his first act on seeing Paul again should be to withdraw formally from his rash engagement; and meanwhile he tacitly avoided conversation with Muriel, whenever he could conveniently do so.

Miss Bretherton arrived on the Monday and was duly installed in her office of duenna, for which office never was any lady of mature years less fitted. On the following day Mr. Ferrars

and his elder daughter went to town; and then, to her dismay, Muriel discovered that change of scene does not necessarily imply corresponding change of feeling. As she sat alone in the great West End hotel where she and her father had taken up their temporary abode, while the latter was for long hours absent "in the City," she found memory fresh as ever, and experienced a new restlessness besides. Was this novel sensation due to the simple fact that she had just left home for the first time since she started on her disastrous journey with the Erskines; or did it spring from a consciousness of Wentworth's closer proximity, and from the knowledge that only the length of a few streets separated her from him in point of space? Perhaps this last consideration had more to do with her strange unrest than she knew.

Mr. Ferrars, whose favourite she was of all his children, spared no pains so to arrange his engagements that she should be left as little as possible in solitude. He even snatched time to escort her to a luncheon-party at a friend's house one day, and to a morning concert another—to say nothing of the evening entertainments he had fixed upon for her amusement. Muriel was gentle and grateful, and

tried hard to imagine she was enjoying herself, but her father missed the spontaneous gaiety of old times, and felt a certain uneasiness in consequence. He wondered if she were really falling in love with Arlingham. "It strikes me he has been dangling after her this long while; it is high time something definite was said and settled, though she is far too good for him. He had better dare begin playing fast and loose in the matter!" the father said angrily within himself.

The visit to the Athenæum had been deferred till the last evening of the Ferrars' brief sojourn in London, at Muriel's particular request. "Nothing will be worth seeing after that," she had pleaded; and Mr. Ferrars had yielded to her representations, though he made a wry face as he did so. "My dear, after a dose of high-sounding tragedy, I should have fancied something light and trifling would have been grateful to the mental taste, like a little jelly or whipped cream after the 'too, too solid' viands at a heavy meal. But you shall have it your own way."

The father and daughter dined earlier than usual that day, in order that Muriel might lose nothing of her dramatic treat—so early, in fact, that for the first part of their meal they had the

great brilliantly lighted dining-room to themselves. After a while, however, two other diners, evidently also intending playgoers, came in and took possession of a table at a little distance from their own. They were young men, one apparently about eight and twenty and the other some six or seven years older, and both had the air of fashionable men about town. They talked briskly and well, in a clever, desultory way, and Muriel caught occasional scraps of their careless sayings athwart her own intermittent conversation with her father which amused her considerably; they seemed on such excellent terms with themselves, and so serenely confident of their own standing and importance in the world. The dessert had just been placed on the table, and she was listening half unconsciously to an animated account of a scene at Henley which one of the two was giving for his friend's benefit, when a waiter brought a folded slip of paper to Mr. Ferrars, who immediately got up.

"Some one called to see me on business," he explained to Muriel; "I must go and speak to him. But I know what he wants, and I shall not let him keep me five minutes. Stay here till I come back, dear."

Muriel nodded assent, and her father went out by a side door, his strong step falling heavily on the polished floor. A massive column shielded Muriel from view where she sat, and it was evident that her two neighbours, hearing Mr. Ferrars' departing footsteps, fancied themselves entirely alone, for they no longer took any pains to subdue their voices, and their talk gradually assumed a more personal complexion. Two or three remarks which fell from them would surely not have been made had they supposed any one to be within earshot. Muriel felt uncomfortable, and longed to apprise them of her proximity, but she could not well leave her place in defiance of her father's injunction, and in any case would probably have felt too shy to do so. She took refuge for a time in Mr. Ferrars' copy of the *Evening Standard*. But it did not long retain her attention. The conversation at the table close by took a new turn, and became replete with such intense and painful interest that she forgot it was by no means intended for her ears.

"By the way, where were you on Sunday?" asked the younger of the two men of his companion. "Did you go out of town?"

"Yes. The Dalrymples asked me to Entwistle from Saturday till Monday."

"Ah, the Dalrymples!" rejoined the first speaker in an appreciative tone which somehow conveyed the impression that he was not in the habit of staying at Entwistle himself, and rather envied his friend the privilege—or the distinction—of possessing the *entrée* there. "Pleasant party?"

"On the whole, yes. Well assorted, as it generally is. Lady Madge Marchmont was there, and the Mildmays, and a handsome niece of Dalrymple's who sang uncommonly well. Then we had St. George: you know, the big Australian sheep-shearer with the superb-looking wife——"

"Call her superb, do you? I was never more disappointed in a woman in my life! Couldn't see any pretensions to beauty about her."

"Think so?" returned the elder man. "I was rather gone on her myself. Every one to his taste: I dare say Molly Dalrymple would have suited you better. Well, to go on with the list, there were three or four men—Fitz Alan, and Charlie Romney, and a clever American I never met before, called Halliday; and Paul Wentworth, who was in a particularly brilliant mood."

"Oh, Wentworth was there, was he? I don't

think he's been quite so much *en évidence* this season as he usually is. I began to think he was going into retirement, to meditate on his sins, perhaps; but not a bit of it, it seems. He was not accompanied by Mrs. Wentworth, I presume?"

"When I say that he was there, don't I intimate without further waste of words that she was not? No, he was *en garçon*, as usual. Apparently enjoying his entire freedom from domestic restraints—also as usual."

"Wicked as ever, eh?"

"I did not observe any special signs of growing sanctity. His taste for *tête-à-tête* walks in the twilight hour and his passion for watching moonlight effects on a pretty face subsist unimpaired, as far as I could judge. Lady Madge is also fond of walking and devoted to moonlight, of course," the young man added, with a laugh which would hardly have gratified that lady, could she have heard it. "No, it doesn't strike me that Wentworth has begun to reflect upon the error of his ways as yet."

"I can't vouch for the truth of the story," the younger man began rather hesitatingly, "but I was told last night at the Palladium——"

"I think I know all about that," interrupted

his companion, glancing warningly in the direction of a waiter who was hovering near. "Was it——" His voice sank till it became inaudible.

"Yes, it was," replied his less cautious friend with distinctness.

The other nodded. "Just as I thought. And it is substantially true, which is more than can always be said for such stories. Lady Madge seems just as foolish as the rest, in spite of her essay writing, and her play at being a politician and a blue-stockings."

"Heartless little creature!" exclaimed the younger man indignantly. "Flirt as she is, I would hardly have believed this of her. Only a few weeks back every one supposed her to be hopelessly in love with poor Mainwaring—some people even went so far as to assert that they were engaged, positively engaged! Well, he has had a lucky escape, if only he could be brought to see it. She seemed devoted to him at that time, too—I should have said she would be only too delighted to marry him."

"Wentworth chose to have it otherwise," returned the other cynically, helping himself to claret, "and he is an adept at getting his own way. Lady Madge is a wily little flirt enough, but she is not a match for her present admirer.

However, I don't think we need waste much pity on her. As you observed, she is not overburdened with heart, and as long as she has an adorer of some kind, I don't think she cares much who he is, as a rule. She went in for captivating Wentworth out of sheer vanity, I fancy—or perhaps in the hope of piquing Mainwaring into a *bonâ fide* proposal. He has never committed himself so far yet, whatever people may say.”

“Well, anyhow, she seems to have flung Mainwaring overboard altogether now.”

“The old story—begun in jest and continued in earnest, at least on one side. For, in spite of your story, I doubt if Wentworth means anything serious this time—even serious mischief. *She* is serious enough about it, in all conscience. I dare say she would go off with him to-morrow if he asked her. But he won't ask her. He has his eye on the Solicitor-Generalship, and he has always drawn the line at anything that might injure him professionally. Even that supreme goddess of his affections, Mrs. St. Clair, could never work him up to the point of thinking the world well lost for love.”

“Mrs. St. Clair! Who was she?”

“Oh, a divinity of Wentworth's, who flourished

in the remoter ages, long before your time. *That* affair was serious enough, if you like. All the women cut her at last, and she had to go and look up her aged husband in India. She was rather of Lady Madge's type of beauty."

"What do women see in Wentworth, I wonder? Is he simply the fashion, or what is it?"

The cynic shrugged his shoulders. "Hard to say. He is neither young, nor handsome, nor a lord."

"I think there is a kind of fascination about him," the younger man said reflectively.

"Perhaps there may be. I was once discussing him with a lady who was *not* in love with him and never had been—she said so, at least, and of course I felt bound to believe her—and this unprejudiced creature gave it as her opinion that a great part of his attractiveness for the weaker sex consisted in a kind of arrogant sweetness he had, 'which gratified the fancy while it dominated the will'—she was fond of reducing particular truths to abstract forms. Pretty idea, and sounds like a thoroughly dispassionate judgment on her part, doesn't it?"—with a laugh which sounded almost fiendish to the ears of one unwilling and agonized auditor.

The other man got up and began putting on his overcoat. "I fancy it consists rather in his seeming to be always terribly in earnest," he answered. "He is a man of immense ability, and an awfully pleasant companion—but morally I believe him to be a very bad lot indeed. Yet I can't help liking the man when I'm with him. Time to be off, Everard, if you are ready." And they went out, perfectly unconscious that by their scandalous gossip they had been the means of inflicting the cruellest torture which one human being can inflict upon another.

Muriel sat still in her chair, while every nerve quivered as if with acute physical pain. Each light and careless word uttered had struck her with the force of a deadly blow; she had shivered and turned sick as the pitiless sentences fell upon her ears, stinging and burning like a lash of scorpions. Yet she could not rise and make her escape—while those terrible voices talked on, her limbs seemed petrified and her will paralysed. And when at last they ceased, she still sat on pale and cold as a breathing statue, till Mr. Ferrars' cheerful voice roused her from her stupefaction, from the trancelike, shame-stricken misery in which she was silently cowering.

"Well, my dear, I have got rid of Wilson at

last. I am very sorry to have kept you so long; I suppose you have been on thorns all this while, but I hope we shall be in tolerably good time, after all. Come at once. But not without your cloak, child! You can't go without your cloak!"

"I forgot," Muriel said apologetically, with a tremulous smile. The earth may be heaving and yawning under our feet, and our hearts may be breaking in mortal agony—but we must always remember to smile and put on our wraps as if nothing was the matter. And in point of fact we generally do remember.

As Muriel passed down the broad staircase to the carriage that was in waiting, with a face almost as white as the swansdown about her throat, a family party who were ascending looked at her with interest.

"What a pretty girl!" said the mother of the family to her immediate companion.

"Pretty!" echoed the young man. "What can you be thinking of, mother? She looks like a ghost—or no, hardly a ghost, but something quite as eerie: like Millais' Grey Lady, who may be either somnambulist, familiar genius, or legendary spirit according to whatever interpretation it pleases you to put upon her. That girl's face is

just as unseeing and expressionless as the Grey Lady's."

It was indeed little that Muriel saw of the great crowded thoroughfares brimming with swarms of eager, hurrying wayfarers, and already beginning to twinkle with a thousand lights, through which she passed in the soft dusk of the summer evening. She was telling herself that she had been mistaken when she said that nothing could make any difference to her—for now that she really knew Wentworth for the first time, it seemed as if the whole face of the world was altered at a single stroke. It was true he had not attempted to deceive her as to what his life had been in past years; it was true that in parting from her he had said, "As for me, I shall probably pretend to forget—in the old fashion;" but Muriel would not have been a woman if she had not flattered herself that his love for her must have wrought in him some change, and that as she could not forget, so likewise was she unforgotten. Now every illusion was dissipated, every softening veil was finally torn from the image of clay which, even after it had fallen from its pedestal, her imagination had continued to transfigure. At last she saw Wentworth as he was, and recoiled from him. At whatever

cost to herself, the battle was over now; for what question could there be of love for such a one? The necessity for conflict was at an end, and she might well be thankful for the pain which rendered all further struggle needless. She had been mad, and a terrible shock had given her back her reason: was not this something for which to be truly grateful? She might have gone on through life believing in the reality of his pretended love for her, but for those words which seemed even in recollection to scorch her very soul: "*He always seems so terribly in earnest.*"





CHAPTER IX.

SEALING THE INDICTMENT.

“You yourself
Only could do that! With a touch ’twas done.”

R. BROWNING.

THE carriage had stopped; they were in the theatre, and the play was proceeding.

It was “Romeo and Juliet” at the Athenæum that night, and the stage was bright with moving masses of colour as the Veronese crowds went to and fro, and the guests gathered in Capulet’s house, and the first lovely lines of the sweetest love-story in the world held the spectators spellbound to listen. But Muriel scarcely heard, scarcely saw. She had just buried her own slain love in a darker and deeper grave than Juliet’s, and her loss was so recent, so sudden, that she had no sympathy to spare for ideal sorrows. She looked at the stage, but saw there only a bewildering kaleidoscope of brilliant

hues and shifting forms; she tried to listen to the actors, and heard only an unmeaning din of words. Not till the close of the first act did the mist lift itself from her senses. Then from out the distracting clash and clang—so it seemed to her—of the dialogue, there rose and reached her Juliet's cry of ruth, foreshadowing all the passion and pain and death that are to follow—the cry of Love battling with a Fate that is too strong for it:

“My only love grown from my only hate!
Too early seen unknown, and known too late!”

After that no word of the tragedy escaped her.

When the second act was over, Mr. Ferrars, who to his own astonishment had found himself growing profoundly interested as the play went on, and whose glasses had become suspiciously dim at one point in the garden scene, rose from his seat. “I see there's a considerable interval to come,” he said, “so I think I will take a turn in the lobby and smoke a cigar. You don't mind? If you look about you, perhaps your quick eyes will discover some one we know in the house.”

Muriel did not at all object to being left alone, but she did not follow out her father's suggestion and institute a search for acquaintances. She leant back in her chair, half hidden by the

curtains of the box—for they had taken a box (stalls, according to Mr. Ferrars' old-fashioned ideas, not being a proper part of the house for ladies), a lower tier box on the left-hand side, almost overhanging the orchestra—and so she remained till she was roused by a sudden stir in the theatre, due to the late advent of two or three foreign royalties who had just dropped into a box overhead. She could not see the cause of the general flutter, so she looked about to discover what it meant. She sat up, bent a little forward, and glanced down into the stalls. And there, leaning carelessly back in his place in the third row, she saw—Paul Wentworth.

It was no fancy of the girl's excited, overwrought brain. The light from the great central chandelier fell full upon his figure, and there was no mistaking the man. He had a fine individuality about him which would have marked him out among a thousand other men anywhere, and which precluded any possibility of Muriel's being misled by a mere chance likeness in a stranger. It was he, sure enough—her broken idol, her dethroned king, the man whose very memory even she had vowed to bury for ever fathoms deep in a nameless grave of abhorrence and contempt.

He sat as if absorbed in thought, with a look that was a little sad and a little tired in his eyes and about his mouth. There was indeed in his whole expression and attitude something conveying the idea of lassitude and ennui; a gracefully subdued air of weariness clung about him, lending a subtle pathetic interest to his face and figure. Doubtless he knew that this air became him well, yet for all that it was not an assumed air, but the genuine and spontaneous outcome of his mood at the moment. Wentworth never troubled himself about his expressions or his attitudes, being content with those which came to him by nature; and his thoughts just then were busy with matters very far removed indeed from the onlookers in the boxes of the Athenæum. It was a matter of perfect indifference to him whether they were observing him or no.

Certainly a number of stray glances did fall in his direction that night—he was a man whom people were rather fond of watching and observing, with a view to subsequent discussion—glances conveying various kinds of sentiment, and eloquent of many and opposite states of feeling on the part of the various observers. Glances of simple curiosity, of admiration, impatience, suspicious dislike; some few glances

that were indulgent and friendly, and not a few that were malicious or severe—but only one gaze that was kind and tender and compassionate, and that, noting the settled melancholy of his brow and lips, grew dim with unavailing sympathy. In all the crowd of those who knew him, only one heart said low to itself, “He is sad—and it is, maybe, through his own fault. But yet—‘oh, the pity of it! the pity of it!’”

Where then was the anger and loathing of an hour ago? Forgotten as though it had never been. Pain indeed remained, and a sorrowful shame which had quickly overshadowed the first brilliant flash of joy at sight of the face whose smiles and frowns had once been all the world to her; but mingled with these was a certain fearful delight in his presence, and a lurking terror lest he should presently rise and go. And now they had darkened the theatre again and blotted him from her sight, and they were back in Verona, listening to Mercutio’s quips and cranks, and hearing the clash of the contending rapiers, and watching the mimic morning dawn in Juliet’s garden while Shakespeare’s hapless lovers came forth to take their last farewell. Was it all a dream from first to last?

It seemed almost like it, for when the audi-

torium grew bright again, Wentworth had vanished. Doubtless he was gone; he must have seen the play before now, and had only come in to while away an idle hour. She should not see him again. And the moment had been so short, and he had looked so sad!

And all the while, in the box next but one to hers, he was talking with even more than his usual cynical brilliancy as he leant over the back of Lady Margery Marchmont's chair, playing with her fan, and letting his ardent eyes return impassioned answers to her coquettish upward glances.

But, after a time, either he grew tired of his charming companion, or he found that enjoyment of her society and of the play were incompatible, for when the curtain fell on the fourth act Muriel beheld him again in his former place and almost in his original attitude. The occupants of the neighbouring stalls were evidently unknown to him, for he addressed no word to them. He was plainly alone—and suddenly there came to Muriel the thought of one who might have been with him, one whose place was of right ever at his side, the wife whom he had wronged so deeply. Something added, *the wife who had never loved him.*

Who had never loved him ! That was indeed strange, passing strange. What could she be like, this woman Wentworth had married ? She had had his first deep love, the love of his early beautiful manhood, before evil had thrown its dark shadow on his heart or sin and selfishness and bitter disappointment graven their mournful records on his marred countenance—and she had cast away the priceless treasure as a worthless thing ! She might have had the keeping of his soul, the guardianship of his better self—and she had deemed the charge too troublesome. He had chosen her from among all women to be his wife, and she had accepted this crowning honour, caring nothing for it save as a means to an end, as a necessary preliminary step towards the acquisition of a handsome house, and well-made gowns, and the *entrée* into “good society.” Had she a heart at all ? Was she a compound of ice and stone ; or a pretty sprite without a soul, like the creatures of German legend ? Did she know what she had done and what she had lost, this woman who might have had all, had she chosen, and to whom all had been given, until in very wantonness of indifference she flung back the gift into the giver’s face ? Muriel could almost have found it in her heart to pity

Paul Wentworth's wife for her insensibility to the loss she had suffered.

And for him, who had been sinned against as well as sinning, every feeling less worthy, less holy, seemed to have become absorbed into one of purest pity, of compassionate regret for the wasted life which was outwardly so brilliant and successful, yet inwardly so destitute of real happiness, for the noble gifts that were being so miserably perverted, for the heart that was striving to dull the pain of its secret wound with such deadly and soul-destroying opiates. She had only pity for him—this girl who owed him nothing but an abiding heartbreak, and to whom he had given nothing but a few tender words and glances that had sufficed to spoil her life—pity without reproach. But then she had loved him; and where we have loved much, we pardon easily.

The tragedy is at an end. Romeo and Juliet are left lying in the Capulet's vault, and the vision of old Verona vanishes, and we come back to common life once more. She is going downstairs on her father's arm, our poor little nineteenth-century heroine whose young feet have been set in such slippery places, and whose long and sore ordeal, did she but know it, is yet

at its very commencement. As in a dream, she hears voices before her talking, in words which are destined to come back to her with startling force one distant day.

"I think I dislike a play with a harrowing *dénouement*," said a lady just in front of Muriel, a pleasant specimen of the genus British matron. "I always had a predilection for coming away from the theatre or shutting up a novel in good spirits."

"I don't call the end of 'Romeo and Juliet' harrowing," answered her daughter, a girl who could not have been more than sixteen.

"Nevertheless I saw you crying over it, my dear Ethel. How was that?"

"Not because it was harrowing, but because it was beautiful, mother. It is the most beautiful idea in the world. They were dead, but they died together: what could they want more?" The child's eyes sparkled and her cheeks flushed as she spoke; and then she and her companion were swept away with the rest of the crowd which was passing from the staircase into the vestibule.

Here there was a great crush, and the Ferrars had to wait some time before their carriage came up. Mr. Ferrars had edged himself and

his daughter into a convenient position near the door, where he could keep a sharp look-out for his hired brougham, and he was so fully occupied in his watch that his remarks were few and intermittent, for which Muriel was thankful. She was watching likewise—she could not help herself—for a tall figure and a dark head which must surely be somewhere among the rustling, swaying, chattering throng.

But people were moving off, the crowd in the vestibule was thinning rapidly, and still there was no sign of Wentworth. Suddenly a clear feminine voice a little way behind Muriel exclaimed, "You here again, Paul? How many times did you tell us last week you had been to see 'Romeo and Juliet' already?"

"More than I can count, I believe," replied a well-known voice—and Muriel's heart seemed to leap into her throat and choke her. The mode of address used by Wentworth's fair interlocutor had not prepared her for those forgotten accents at her very ear.

"And you are not tired of it yet?" pursued the first speaker.

"No; Shakespeare does not easily weary me," Wentworth answered. He was speaking in the briefly courteous tone Muriel had so often heard

him employ when he had been caught unawares by some unwelcome and persistently talkative fellow countryman or countrywoman in Switzerland. "I do not often stay through the whole play," he added; "I drop in for a scene or two at a time. But to-night I have rashly pledged myself to go to a party which I feel certain will be tiresome in the extreme, and as I wish to postpone the evil hour of my penance as long as I decently can, I lingered on here—and found Romeo very good company."

As he uttered his last words, the group of which he formed one moved, and came from behind the door to take up their station in front of it. Besides Wentworth, it consisted of three people—father, mother and daughter, all of the commonplace, well-bred, well-dressed type. They passed so close to Muriel that the elder lady's long train swept over her feet, and the light overcoat which hung on Wentworth's arm brushed the folds of her cloak as he went by. But he did not see her.

Was it her fancy that, now his face was close at hand, it looked thinner and older, a little more worn, a trifle sadder than it had used to be? How strange to be so near him—she could have touched him with her outstretched hand where

he stood—and yet to see him so utterly unconscious of her nearness, and to know that she must not make a movement to dissipate that unconsciousness!

“Will the carriage never come?” pettishly demanded the younger of the two ladies, who had not spoken before. “I detest waiting. Don’t you, Cousin Paul?”

“‘All things come round to him who will but wait,’” Wentworth commented with sententious mockery. “Not that I profess philosophical patience myself, Lily, in the matter of waiting for carriages or anything else. Excuse me”—with a sudden change of tone—“I am afraid I must say good night to you all. Good night, Connop.”

A significant glance passed between the elder lady and her husband as Wentworth moved rapidly away towards the spot where, through an opening in the lessening crowd, he had just caught sight of Lady Madge Marchmont’s graceful head.

There was no want of animation in his manner now, as he stood talking in an undertone to the beautiful widow, his eyes riveted on her face, and his tall head bending close to hers—Lady Margery was decidedly diminutive—in order to catch her low-voiced replies. Her companions

—two girls, evidently her sisters, and a young man who was presumably her brother and regarded Wentworth with no very friendly eye—fidgeted and appeared ill at ease during the colloquy. And Muriel stood and watched the scene until it pleased Lady Margery to end it by taking Wentworth's arm to go out to her carriage, which had already been announced more than once in stentorian tones. "You are coming to the Bennetts' to-morrow?" Muriel heard her say softly to Wentworth, as they passed by.

"Of course—since you are going," was the response, uttered more softly still.

A moment later, Mr. Ferrars touched Muriel's hand joyfully. "Here it is at last! Come, dear," he said.

Lady Margery's high-stepping cobs trotted off, and Wentworth turned to hail a hansom. In his haste he jostled against a fine-looking, elderly man, who had a tall slim girl, cloaked and hooded in white, on his arm.

"I beg your pardon!" he said hastily, without turning his head—and passed on just in time to secure the coveted vehicle.

He gave the number of a house in Berkeley Square to the driver, and then paused coolly on

the pavement to light a cigarette, to the infuriation of waiting cabmen and restless link-boys. Meanwhile the elderly gentleman had handed his lady into a brougham immediately in front of the hansom, and was about to follow himself, when he halted with one foot on the step, exclaiming audibly, in the tone common to elderly gentlemen when a trifle ruffled, "Muriel, Muriel, where is the glass? You have left it in the box, I suppose?"

Paul Wentworth started slightly, and let his match go out. A girl's face appeared at the window of the brougham—a delicate, colourless face set in a frame of soft dark hair, with deep grey eyes which looked strangely dark and full of pain by the flaring gaslight, and a mouth set in resolute lines of pride and scorn.

"It is quite safe, father; I have it here," said a clear low-toned voice, the voice of Muriel Ferrars. And the elderly gentleman got in well pleased, and the door was shut, and the carriage drove away; and Wentworth—forgetting his cigarette, it is true—sprang into his hansom and was driven away also, since in these days, whatever may happen, we do not stop to soliloquize on London pavements, nor permit ourselves to lose even for a moment the calmly stoical aspect

which it is the chief aim and object of modern society to acquire and preserve.

Yet as the hansom dashed away through the lighted roar of the Strand, Paul Wentworth leant back in it, breathless and white to the lips. This pioneer of light and leading, this social celebrity of mature years, this brilliant, ambitious man of the world, found his heart clanging in his ears and all his pulses throbbing madly—because of what? a momentary glimpse of a girl's face, half a dozen words spoken by a girl's voice. Decidedly all the training in the world would never make a stoic of Paul Wentworth.

He lost count of time, and was surprised to find himself, in what seemed to him a few moments, at his destination. He got down, however, dismissed his cab, and went in; but all with the automatic manner and abstracted look of a man moving in a dream or acting under compulsion from magnetic influence. As he passed in, two other guests came out—one a quick, shrewd-looking man of middle age, who might be a lawyer, and the other a languid young dandy of the "masher" type. The elder man raised his hand in familiar salutation to Wentworth as he went by, but the latter returned no responsive sign, and walked straight on. His

friend turned and stared after him for the space of a few seconds.

“Know that man?” inquired his companion, with an affected drawl.

“Yes, very well. It is Paul Wentworth. Wonder what’s the matter with him: he looks as if he had seen a ghost.”





CHAPTER X.

COUNSELS OF PERFECTION.

“There is in man a Higher than the Love of Happiness: he can do without happiness, and instead thereof find Blessedness.”—CARLYLE.

“I WONDER whether you consider it your mission in life to go about the world making people desperately uncomfortable?”

Lucy Ferrars addressed Philip Irvine in tones half mischievous, half appealing, as she put this question.

“In some sense, yes,” he answered with entire gravity. “But suppose you define your meaning a little more clearly.”

“I can’t define,” she replied pettishly. “It is the thing of all others that I am perfectly incapable of doing. I am sure you must know that. Cannot you set your mind to work without a definition to help you? Surely one may feel,

without being able to give a logical account of the process ! ”

“ If it were real inability to explain that made your question so vague,” said Irvine slowly, turning to look at Lucy as she sat beside him on the garden bench, “ it would be another matter. But I think the vagueness proceeded from quite a different cause.”

She made no rejoinder, but her eyes asked, “ From what ? ”

“ From indolence first of all : you hate the trouble of thinking. And then from pride : you cannot bear to own yourself in the wrong. So you take refuge in convenient general statements.”

“ I am ready to own that you have made me very dissatisfied with myself,” Lucy retorted. “ Does that particular statement please you ? ”

“ It is something to begin upon,” Irvine answered. “ Unless you became conscious of the insufficiency of your present life, what hope could there be of your longing to live a higher and fuller one ? But if you will not exert yourself to analyze the vague feeling of self-dissatisfaction that troubles you, how can I—how can any one help you in the matter ? ” His voice had grown very gentle.

Irvine's severity had provoked Lucy's high spirit, his unconscious tenderness melted her at once. "I know I have lived always only to please myself," she said sadly. "One goes on from day to day: pleasant things come, and there does not seem any special call——"

"Because you did not listen for it," Irvine interposed. "There are voices enough summoning every thinking soul to fling aside its toys and pastimes and get to work without delay; but people are so busy here and there that they have no leisure to pause even for a moment to listen." He spoke more severely again.

"I was not wilfully deaf," said Lucy humbly.

A grave smile parted his firm lips. "I know. Hitherto you have been a child, with a child's ignorance of life's meaning and duties, and therefore with all a child's excuses for having occupied yourself only with its outward shows. Do not think I wish to judge you harshly for the past. I only want to show you that you are entering now on a new era. You cannot legitimately be a child any longer."

"I don't wish to be," she answered. "You have shown me so plainly the littleness and hollowness of all the things I used to care for, that I can only feel dreadfully ashamed of ever

having cared for them so much. I don't think I could go on now from day to day quite aimlessly, and feel contented. And, after all, amusements don't always make one happy. There are better kinds of happiness."

"You must not think too much about happiness," returned Irvine, with a sudden break in his voice. "It comes to few in reality; and when it does come, goes again so quickly! After all, life must be sad. How can one be happy, how dare one be happy, with the thought pressing upon one day and night that at one's very door are millions sunk in ignorance and misery and want, and, what is infinitely worse, sunk in sin and degradation, without a helping hand to draw them up in this world, or a voice to speak the word which might save them from an eternity of more hopeless wretchedness in the next?"

Lucy sat silent. Irvine, who had risen to his feet as he uttered his last impassioned words, went on after a moment's pause: "And remember, these are but a mere fragment, a sample pattern, so to speak, of the humanity which is withering and agonizing and sinning and perishing all the world over, while we sit at home and cultivate happiness, forsooth. And this age of

ours is but one on the roll of centuries—of centuries past, perhaps of centuries yet to come. Who is sufficient for the bare thought of these things ?”

The mingled grief and scorn, the profound pity and immeasurable indignation of his voice might have moved the least enthusiastic hearer, while the light in his eyes and the quiver of his lips gave unmistakable evidence that his ordinarily calm and unemotional nature was stirred to its very depths. Never before had Lucy seen him so natural, so simply and broadly human ; but mingled with this outburst of irrepressible human sympathy was a touch of something even higher—something angelic almost, which awed the girl while it delighted her. She felt that Irvine had momentarily lifted the veil from his inner life, and given her a glimpse of aims and motives which made her own most serious thoughts, her loftiest and least worldly aspirations, seem trivial and childish by comparison. She looked at him almost reverentially as she replied, “At least you have no cause to reproach yourself. You have done what you could personally.”

“Something perhaps ; but what I could—that is, all I might have done—no, indeed. What

might not even one Christian do if such a man were really single-hearted—if God's work and God's cause were his only object in life? Double-mindedness—it is that which blights our best efforts. If we do not allow ourselves to be diverted altogether from our purposes, we go to our work too often with only half a heart."

"*Your* heart seems to be always with your work," said Lucy impulsively. "I think you care for nothing else."

"So little is that the case," he returned, with rather a melancholy smile, "that I have been earnestly debating with myself all day whether I should go back to it to-morrow, or extend my holiday over another twenty-four hours. You see I am not such a willing labourer as you fancied."

Every ray of colour left the girl's face, and she looked up at her companion with dismayed, startled eyes. "Go back already?" she exclaimed. "But that will be such a short visit—very short indeed!"

Irvine bent down his eyes as she spoke. Something—he knew not what—in those simple broken phrases of remonstrance moved him strangely, and made it difficult for him to meet them with any commonplace of conventional politeness.

"You forget," he said rather huskily, "I have been here a fortnight to-day."

The words were blunt, and from a guest's lips sounded almost discourteous, but Lucy did not seem to notice this.

"That is short, for a holiday," she rejoined eagerly. "Most university men who have nothing to do beyond their college work allow themselves far more; and you work so hard besides! George said you wanted rest and change, and Alderton air is always considered good, though it is a dull place, of course. But I thought you liked it." Her lips quivered as a child's might have done.

"I like it too much, as I told you just now," Irvine replied hastily. "And I have stayed too long already—I must leave to-morrow."

"To-morrow? Not the next day?"

Irvine had spoken without any subtle intention, with no idea of conveying by his words anything beyond the business-like fact that he had been too long absent from his classes and meetings in Bethnal Green. But another and deeper meaning had been given them now. The ring of unspeakable anxiety, the depth of unconscious entreaty, in Lucy's question could not be mistaken. Five words only—but they were

enough to reveal all the secret of the girl's soul to the man; enough to cause the man's heart, that heart whose rebellious pulses he had so resolutely silenced hitherto, to leap up in his breast in response to the innocent appeal which told so much. For an instant, as their eyes met, both were ineffably, supremely happy—with such happiness as it is well to have known once, albeit but for a moment.

Then, with a sort of shiver, Irvine recovered himself, repeating the last words he had uttered before the blinding revelation overtook him, like a man coming out of a state of trance. "Yes," he said almost dreamily, "I have stayed too long—too long."

Lucy said nothing, and indeed hardly grasped the meaning of his words. Had she done so, she might have heard the knell of her fate in them. But for the moment the future did not concern her at all; the present was all-sufficient.

He gazed at her a moment longer, with a wonderful tenderness softening his cold statuesque features; then the tenderness faded, and only an expression of settled and almost stern resolution remained. "So I must make up my mind to go to-morrow, I believe," he continued, resuming his usual grave and composed manner.

"Do you think it would inconvenience your father to send to the 11.40 train? I should like to reach my quarters early in the afternoon, if I can manage it without putting him out of his way."

"I am sure he can easily manage it," Lucy answered. "But he will be sorry." She made no further remonstrance: what had been easy and natural ten minutes earlier was impossible now.

"I am sorry also," Irvine returned quietly. "Then, since you think that arrangement will suit Mr. Ferrars, I will send a line to tell them to expect me at Crum Street about two—it would not be fair to take old Mary by surprise. I had better go in and write at once."

As he spoke, there swept across his mind a double vision: the vision of that to which he was deliberately returning, the vision of all he was voluntarily leaving behind. On the one hand, he knew, was the small, bare, close room which was all he had to call his own in the cramped, temporary Mission House, with a surrounding prospect of dingy streets and noisome alleys peopled by poverty-stricken, degraded, vicious human beings; everywhere sounds of clamorous misery and brutal strife, or of drunken revelry and mirth more hideous still—and, bitterest

thought of all! perpetual loneliness of heart and life. The alternative was all before his eyes: sunshine, flowers, peace, purity, tranquil well-being—and by his side the living embodiment of all that to him seemed fairest and dearest in human nature, already his in heart, and to be made his irrevocably by instant loyal pledge and promise if he so willed it. But he willed it not. He added not a word more; he did not move one step towards her. Even with those two contrasting pictures before his mind's eye, Philip Irvine did not flinch or falter. He turned resolutely from the beautiful to the repulsive, from proffered joy to lifelong renunciation. Should he lay down his cross because it had suddenly become heavy, heavier than he had ever dreamt of its becoming when he first lifted it to his strong young shoulders? Nay, verily. Must he not rather strive to rejoice that he was counted worthy to be called to the loftier heights of self-sacrifice?

After he had left Lucy, some sense of the undercurrent of signification in his words began to dawn upon her, and her dim forebodings of evil were confirmed by the persistence with which he held aloof from her during the rest of that long July day. He had determined to

exchange no words with her beyond those of formal courtesy, until he should have had leisure to think, to resolve, to pray. Philip Irvine did a good deal of his thinking on his knees.

There he fought out his battle that night, the hardest it had ever yet fallen to his lot to fight. About his ultimate decision there was no doubt from the first. He could not, if he would, have gone back from the self-dedication which had suddenly become self-immolation as well; he had disciplined himself too profoundly already for any such backsliding as that to be possible. But his whole nature rose up in rebellion against the pitiless yoke he had set upon its cravings, crying out, in a voice that would once for all be heard, for the human gladness and sympathy and love which he sternly denied it; and heaven seemed to have grown dim and distant and unsubstantial now that earth had burst into undreamt-of glory and sweetness in the reflected light of a girl's eyes. It was with this inward revolt that Irvine struggled so long and so fiercely. It was the lost spiritual vision that he wrestled so earnestly to regain, knocking unweariedly at heaven's doors in his passionate faith, if only he might achieve the conquest of his unruly will, and silence those murmurs of a spirit which, even in the midst of

its most cruel throes, pleaded only for strength to renounce, to overcome, to submit. There could be but one end to such a conflict so fought. The citadel of his resolution was safe from the outset.

Once only did it seem to waver. He could not forget that he was not alone in his suffering—that in his thoughtlessness, his self-confidence, and his forgetfulness of his vocation, he had brought grievous sorrow on another. In her innocence, in her ignorance of his position, Lucy had learnt to care for him, and in a moment of unguarded weakness he had allowed his own love—till then unsuspected even by himself—to become unmistakably apparent. He was too honest to salve his conscience by specious sophistries as to no words of love having passed between himself and Lucy, for he knew that their mutual, although unspoken, confession needed none to complete it. The question therefore arose: Since he had gone so far, was it not his duty to go farther still? He had, of course, a perfect right to resign his own happiness, but had he any right to break Lucy Ferrars' heart in the process? Might he not, by an acknowledged and painful descent to a lower plane of living for the sake of another, be crucifying self more thoroughly than by per-

sistently adhering to the loftier altitude held at the cost of that other's suffering? On this thought Irvine paused, but for a moment merely. He had been guilty of one sin—he never gave soft names to his transgressions—was he therefore to atone for it by another and a deadlier one: to palliate the consequences of carelessness and self-pleasing by the breach of an engagement towards Heaven none the less binding that it had never taken the form of an open vow, and by deliberate self-indulgence disguised under the plausible cloak of unselfishness? Could he forsake the work that was crying out for him, even had it been permissible to do so? After all, Irvine's religion was in his work. It was accident which had made him a Puritan; there was none of the Puritan selfishness in him, none of that egotism in things spiritual which is often the repulsive characteristic of Puritanism proper. To live for others, to work for others, to save others, had always been his primary impulse. He obeyed it now, at the cost of all that makes life dear to the ordinary man.

But his self-reproach was very bitter, nevertheless. And mingled with all his other pain was the humiliation of his fall, and the discovery that he was far weaker than he had imagined—

he who had supposed himself altogether out of reach of such a temptation as had easily overcome his boasted strength. Another struggle was in store for him—a conflict with his natural haughtiness of spirit. Should he confess his wrong-doing to Lucy? Did he not owe her that reparation? He felt that he shrank intensely from making this confession, and weighty arguments for maintaining silence were not by any means wanting to him. Yet if he left Lucy without a word, he knew that it would be from no exaggerated sense of honour and from no unselfish consideration for her, but simply because he was a proud man, and it was hard for him to say, “I have done wrong; forgive me,” even to the child who loved him.

But before the sun rose, this last enemy, too, was conquered. “I will ask her pardon and tell her all plainly,” he was saying to himself as the first rays of cold grey light stole through the half-opened window and showed him pale and weary from the long conflict, yet with a dawning light of victory in the eyes that had failed for looking upward all that placid summer night. “It is best that she should know, and she has a right to know. Unless I should see cause to think I was over hasty in my conclusions yester-

day——” He stopped there, with a new pang at his heart, keener than all that had gone before. He was still very human, after all.

Unfortunately he had made no mistake in his conclusions. When he and Lucy met at breakfast, the silence and shyness which overtook the bright, frank girl, generally the very centre of all joyous life and pleasant talk, the timidity of her morning greeting, still more the mute question in those pathetic eyes—hitherto always so sunny!—when for an instant they encountered his and seemed to ask, “Have I offended? Are you angry with me?”—all these signs told him plainly that on the previous day he had read her face aright. If there was a strange pleasure in the thought which he could not quite conceal from himself, there was more of poignant pain. She loved him—and that day he was to leave her for ever. *For ever*: the separation must be total, final, as far as this world was concerned. He loved her too well for any half-measures to be possible. It must be his duty to see that, whatever else the future might bring to pass, he and she should never meet again.

He lingered behind the rest in the dining-room, nerving himself for the parting interview.

Mr. Ferrars had taken leave of his guest as they rose from the breakfast-table, pleading the calls of his farm and of his waiting bailiff as an excuse for his precipitate departure. "This is your first visit to us, Irvine, but I hope it will not be by any means your last," the old man said heartily, bent on showing cordiality to his son's friend. "Remember, there will always be a welcome for you at Alderton."

"Thank you," answered the young man. "You are very kind." Then Mr. Ferrars had gone out, and the others had dispersed in different directions, leaving Irvine for a moment alone.

He had just made up his mind to go in search of Lucy, when the door hastily opened and admitted, not, as he had hoped, Lucy herself, but her sister. Muriel was extremely pale, and had a worn, harassed look strange to see on so young a face, but at sight of Irvine she flushed suddenly. She had been seeking him, so it was not his mere presence which caused that sudden accession of colour—it was his attitude, as he leant with one arm on the mantelpiece, looking into the fireless grate, just now full of graceful ferns and delicate grasses. Figure, pose, and expression alike suggested a faint but very real resemblance to Wentworth.

The flush faded as suddenly as it had arisen when Muriel said, laying her hands on the back of a chair that stood near, "Mr. Irvine, I should like to speak to you, if you can give me a few moments. I am anxious to ask your advice."

"I am quite at your service, Miss Ferrars." A certain accent of surprise mingled with the grave courtesy of Irvine's tone.

"Perhaps you will think it strange that I should appeal to you," Muriel went on. "But my—my difficulties are very great, and I need counsel so terribly!"

He was too truthful to assure her that he saw nothing strange in her appeal. "I shall be very glad if I can help you," he replied, "but surely you must have better advisers at hand than myself."

"There is no one who can help me in this. They would not understand, and I could not explain to them. But I think you might be able to tell me what I ought to do."

He bent his head gravely. "I will do my best." Secretly he wondered whether she were a little mad. He hoped at least that she would state her case briefly, in order that he might be free to go and look for Lucy.

"I have come to you," Muriel continued,

"because I feel sure you will not advise me to do what is easiest or most pleasant, but only what is right. I want to do that—just that. And I can trust your counsel, for I know it is the one thing you care for."

"I wish it were so!" Irvine responded in a low, troubled voice. "If you mean that I am a Christian, Miss Ferrars—that is true, I hope." Twenty-four hours earlier he would not have added the qualifying sentence.

"My question is this," said the girl, passing over the interruption. "If there is a—a temptation in my way which seems to come between me and all that is holiest; if I cannot keep my thoughts from dwelling on it, though I hate it ever so much"—she spoke with an emphasis which sounded almost angry—"is it my duty, my plain duty, to take advantage of any barrier that I can put between myself and it?"

"Surely," replied Irvine, slightly bewildered to all appearance. "In such a matter your course admits of no question."

"But you don't see," she rejoined eagerly; "there is a question. The barrier doesn't exist; I should have to make it for myself. What I want to know is this: Supposing that by some means within my reach I could help myself to

forget the temptation, leave myself no time to think of it any more, put it away from me by other interests and cares—what must I do?”

“It all depends on the nature of the means,” said Irvine. “If you fancy that temptation is to be driven out by amusements and pleasures——”

“It would not be pleasant to me,” she interposed; “it would not make me happy. Sometimes I think it is too hard for me to do at all. I wish only to know if I *must* do it? Will it be a sin to leave it undone?”

She was painfully in earnest—Irvine saw that well enough; and she had entirely forgotten that there was anything curious in the demand she was making upon him. That he was a young man and she a young girl was nothing to her; a fortnight spent under the same roof with him had convinced her that he was a man who might help her in her decision, and that was all she cared for. He grasped this intuitively, while marvelling secretly what this nameless trouble of the girl’s could be. His own interests and conflicts had nearly effaced the records of his earlier misgivings from his mind—but in any case he would have shrunk from connecting them with Muriel’s present distress, almost as he would have shrunk from an attempt to penetrate

the mystery in which she veiled the circumstances that had led to her singular appeal.

"It is an old superstitious error," he said slowly, after a minute's reflection, "to endeavour to set up artificial barriers between ourselves and our besetting sins."

"But if it seems the only hope of overcoming? I have tried—otherwise, and I *cannot* overcome."

"Are you quite sure," demanded Irvine, "that you are perfectly genuine in your wish to overcome? Are you sure that there is no lurking love of the temptation concealed behind all your efforts to subdue it? May not this be the secret of your disinclination to erect the barrier you speak of?"

Muriel had been pale before—at Irvine's question she grew ashen. "I—don't know," she answered faintly, grasping more tightly the rail of the chair on which she leant.

Irvine saw that his probe had gone home. "If there is any doubt in your mind on this point, then the decision you have alluded to may be the means of resolving it. Then you are probably right in making it a test question." He paused, and then resumed less coldly, "I do not know the exact details of your difficulty, and I

can only point you to a general rule in consequence. But this is all we usually need—it is God's own way of dealing with us. So I may safely say to you that, in a doubtful question of right and wrong, the way that looks the hardest is generally the safest. If there is a very pronounced shrinking from anything which might come between us and our besetting sins, depend upon it, there lies the remedy for them ready to our hand."

"It would be very hard for me," Muriel murmured. "But if it is the only way—and it would make other people happier, perhaps——"

Irvine interrupted her brusquely. "Miss Ferrars, you think far too much about happiness. That is not the question, whether for ourselves or others." His voice grew a little unsteady, and he spoke as if arguing as much with himself as with Muriel. "We have our allotted work to do here, with which nothing—*nothing*, I say—must be allowed to interfere; and the finishing that work is necessary for every one. But happiness is not necessary for any one, and we can all afford to wait for it."

His fair face, aglow with earnestness, took a high steadfast look which made it even in Muriel's eyes, dim with her own sore trouble and

perplexity, as the face of an angel. He waited, as if for her to speak, then added simply, "Further than this I fear I cannot advise you. In the end it is always with ourselves that the great decision rests."

Muriel lifted her head and answered clearly, "I thank you very much; I have decided now, I think. You have made my course quite plain to me."

Irvine put out his hand, with a certain sense of inward shame that his response to her appeal should have been so cold and perfunctory, so different from his eager guidance of her sister. "I am glad to have been of any use," he responded. "And now I must wish you good-bye. I should like to see your sister before I go; can you tell me where to find her?"

"Lucy? She is in the drawing-room, arranging flowers;" and with a few formal words they parted, each equally ignorant of the other's secret—she unconscious that he was engaged in a conflict even harder than hers, he all unknowing that the words just fallen from his lips had gone to fix the destiny of three lives.

As soon as Muriel had left him, Irvine went straight to Lucy. He found her, as he had been told he should, in the dark, low-ceiled drawing-

room—a gracious, youthful figure in a blue summer gown, her hands busy with a great china bowl full of roses. The flowers she was arranging dropped from her fingers as he came in, all but one little half-opened crimson bud which she continued to hold, twisting it mechanically as she spoke. “You are going? Is it time?”

“It is not quite time. But I wanted to speak to you for a few minutes before I left, as well as to say good-bye. I have seen your father and sister; and George, I believe, is kindly going to drive me to the station——”

He stopped for an instant, finding his task even more difficult than he had anticipated, and Lucy, with natural feminine distaste for trying pauses, struck in with, “I am glad Alderton is looking its best to-day, that you may carry away a pleasant recollection of it. Perhaps we shall see you again some day—some time when George is at home——”

“No,” he returned, bracing himself for the supreme effort. “I can never—I must never come here again.”

She could not refrain from a start as she looked up at his pale, set face. Whatever she had anticipated, it was nothing like this—nothing so utterly hopeless and final.

"I should like to make an explanation to you in very few words," Irvine went on; "that is, if you will allow me. May I speak?"

"Certainly." Her heart beat faintly and her throat felt dry and paralyzed, but she stood very quietly and steadily before him. Only the rosebud in her right hand quivered a little.

"Yesterday afternoon," said Irvine in his level, passionless voice, "I found out that I loved you, and I allowed you to see it. It is true, I did not tell you so in words, but that is of small consequence. You knew." He paused, awaiting her answer.

"I—thought so," Lucy replied. She spoke very low and unwillingly, as though the truth were being wrung from her.

"I saw at once," continued the young man, less calmly, "how unworthily I had acted towards you. Not intentionally—there at least my conscience acquits me. But I have been culpably thoughtless and self-indulgent, and I do not seek to excuse myself. A man bound as I am has no right to be careless."

He looked down and went on hurriedly, as if repeating a lesson. "But in my overweening pride I fancied myself secure. Years ago, when—as I see now—it cost me nothing, I resolved to

form no ties which could come between me and the work I had taken up. I called this a taking up the cross—last night it was shown me to have been neither more nor less than a piece of self-pleasing. I did not fancy that a time would ever come when I should be tempted to wish for that which I renounced without pain; I was perfectly contented with the lot I had chosen. It is different now.”

It is different now! Lucy, watching the speaker’s countenance, fathomed the greatness of the difference in some measure.

“But I cannot go back from my resolve because it costs me something now. Not even”—looking up—“for your sake, though I fear I have brought sorrow on you as well. I dare not.”

There was a minute’s silence. Overhead the old clock on the staircase rang out its silver chimes, followed by the deep resonant sound of the striker announcing the hour; a blackbird trilled merrily on the very window-sill; a sudden gust of soft wind blew aside the lowered blinds and stirred the heap of roses on the table.

“Was I mistaken?” Irvine asked at length, while the colour came and went in Lucy’s down-cast face. “If so, pardon what I have said. In

that case I am glad to think—— No, I have sunk so low that I am not sure I can honestly say even that.”

To tell a girl that you believe she is in love with you, while announcing in the same breath your unalterable determination never to make her your wife, is a peculiar method of procedure ; but then Philip Irvine was a very peculiar young man. I will not say that Lucy felt no promptings of feminine pride urging her to deny his assertions, but the poor little transparent fictions withered unspoken before the searching gaze of her strange lover's truthful eyes. “There was no mistake,” she said softly.

Philip Irvine's face lit up for a moment, only to grow more profoundly sad again. “Then there is nothing I can do but ask your forgiveness,” he replied.

“My forgiveness !” Lucy raised her face suddenly, and spoke with a sob which had more of triumph than of grief in it. “Forgiveness for what will be the glory and the happiness of my whole life ? There is trouble with it too, but I can bear that for the sake of—the other. I am not such a weak child as you think me. But I know I am unworthy, and——”

A passionate exclamation was on Irvine's lips,

but he forced it back. "Do you imagine," he asked, "that I think you other than thrice worthy any love I could offer you? What separates us is something quite different—a self-dedication which I cannot set aside, and which, God helping me, I hope I would not set aside even if I could. I don't regret what has befallen me. I needed the lesson, for I fancied it was easy to be a Christian—I had to learn by experience that it is the hardest thing in the world. But the thought of having troubled you so deeply is very bitter to me."

"Perhaps I needed a lesson too," said the girl humbly. "You said once that I led a butterfly's life, but I think I shall never do that again now. And you have taught me so much, and given me new things to live for. You must not be too sorry for me."

Perhaps, at that moment, he was the most to be pitied of the two. Her thoughts hardly went beyond the present, while he foresaw the future only too plainly. Nevertheless there was a new light in his eyes as he answered, "You have made me happier than I deserve to be by telling me this. My prayer for you henceforward must be that you may remember the teachings—and forget the teacher."

"No," she replied in her childlike fashion, "please not! I don't want to forget. And so long as I am patient, there can be no harm in remembering."

"I suppose not," Irvine acquiesced. "Not to throw off the burden, but to bear it uncomplainingly, is the highest achievement, after all. And if we could see it," he added more firmly, "this trial may be an honour in itself. When God counts us worthy, then He calls us to greater sacrifices. In this world, at least, I think it is His way of saying, 'Friend, come up higher.'"

Lucy looked up into her lover's noble face. "I can't reach up to you," she said timidly, "but I will try to live as you would have me."

"You will not let me ask your forgiveness?"

"No. I have nothing to forgive."

"And you are glad of my decision? You don't wish me to do otherwise? You would only despise me if, after putting my hand to the plough, I were to turn back?"

Lucy hesitated a moment. Then, "I can't say it!" she broke out. "I know you have done right, I feel it—perhaps if you had done otherwise, I should have felt almost disappointed in you. But I cannot tell you I am *glad*. I have

disappointed you in this, I know," she added, with tears in her eyes; "but I am not like you, remember. I am only trying to begin, and"—with a quick, hot flush—"you see, I—I love you so much."

Philip Irvine was a determined man, but for a moment all his battle was to fight again, and he needed all his strength and determination to win it.

"Since you have forgiven me," he said at last, taking the little hand that held the rose, and clasping it closely for a minute, "I can only say, may God forgive me also, and bless *you*, Lucy! Good-bye." He turned to go; he had reached the door before she could make answer—

"Good-bye. But—for all time to come—is there *never* to be anything for us two to hope for again?"

Irvine turned with his hand upon the lock, all his iron composure gone. "Surely yes," he said falteringly. "He who made us what we are knows how bitter a thing this parting is—and when time is over, there is all eternity to come. Surely in God's time we *shall* meet again—but not here."

He passed out and closed the door behind him—closed it on her, and youth, and love, and all his

brief fortnight's dream of happiness; closed it deliberately and irrevocably. It was all over.

All over? Not so, I think. "*No memorie liveth in the hearte soe long or soe sweetlie as that of a love slayne by honoure,*" one wrote centuries ago—and it is precisely in a pure strong heart like his that such fragrance lingers longest and most gladly. Oftentimes in years to come, when heart-sick with loneliness and disappointment, worn with apparently fruitless battle against ever-growing evil, or craving human sympathy amidst the sneers and slanders of a world that knows not such men as he, even as of old it knew not One their Master, Philip Irvine will recall the face of his little love as she looked up to him through her tears that far-away summer day, and hear again the girlish accents which faltered, 'I love you so much.' And the recollection of that trustful look, the memory of those tender words, will fall upon his bruised heart and lonely spirit "*like dewes and breathes from the heavene where (surely) there is laide uppe for him the soule of that slayne love.*"



CHAPTER XI.

“AMICI, COMŒDIA FINITA EST.”

“Now at the last gasp of love’s latest breath,
When his pulse failing, passion speechless lies,
When faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And innocence is closing up his eyes,
Now if thou would’st, when all have given him over,
From death to life thou might’st him yet recover!”

DRAYTON.

“AH, Paul! how are you? Excuse me while I finish this. My brother, Mr. Wentworth—Mr. Arlingham.”

Time—a raw, foggy, cheerless afternoon in November; place—a sparsely tenanted room in a great London club; persons present—Philip Irvine, busily engaged in writing, and Geoffrey Arlingham, standing beside him awaiting the completion of the official-looking document which Irvine was filling up. To them, as the old playbooks have it, Paul Wentworth—in a

desperate hurry, and evidently not best pleased at finding his half-brother pre-engaged.

He responded, however, with tolerable graciousness to the salutation of his new acquaintance, and proceeded to enlarge on the shortcomings of the weather with all an Englishman's customary force and fervour. Arlingham, Arlingham?—the name had a familiar sound about it.

"London is odious in November, I grant you," he said in reply to Jack's opprobrious remarks concerning the climate of the metropolis. "In all other months of the year, August perhaps excepted, I love my London, but in November there are moments when I go very near to hating her. A fortnight of perpetual fog is enough to make a man regret that he was ever born a Briton."

"The London fogs are beginning to spread themselves over a great deal of the surrounding country," Jack returned, "but I am glad to say they haven't got down to Holmshire yet. In our part of the world we get a clear atmosphere all the year round, though as the crow flies we are barely thirty miles from Charing Cross."

"Ah—Holmshire," said Wentworth reflectively. "What part?"

Jack concluded Irvine's brother must be a

great swell of some sort, since he considered himself entitled to put questions in so brusque a manner. "Well, West Holmshire you would call it, I suppose," he answered. "I live about five miles from Milford, if you happen to know where that is." He spoke a little defiantly, under the influence of an idea that this lofty-mannered individual might perhaps profess a lofty ignorance of the whereabouts of so insignificant a market town as Milford.

Wentworth did nothing of the kind. "I know it; I have passed through it once or twice," he said. "It's a pretty sylvan country thereabouts, beautiful with the kind of beauty which is restful to one's eyes. Not a neighbourhood that people would ever flock to *see*, but one which might be extremely pleasant to live in, I should think, and that is more than can be said of many places made eminently to be looked at. Being so near town, too, the general mind must be kept astir. It is in the remoter country districts that men get so localized."

"I don't know about the stir," said Jack, with a laugh. "Holmshire people are rather a stupid lot. They have no enterprise. Why, it's been the hardest work for two winters past to keep a pack of hounds going at all! Men about us

seem to have lost all taste for sport, and this autumn the election made matters worse—we had nothing but politics from morning till night. Even all the ladies for miles round could talk of nothing else. One would have thought that if Ireland succeeded in getting a Parliament, the world would instantly fall to pieces!"

"‘The world’ is a vague expression," observed Wentworth, looking particularly grave. "It generally means just so much—or so little—of our environment as we can take in and grasp. Therefore it would be quite possible for something—say a moral earthquake—to occur, which should make one man’s bigger world go very decidedly to pieces while leaving another’s little circle quite unharmed. Hence the manifest advantage of narrowing one’s sphere of interest."

He spoke with so innocent an air and in such apparent good faith that Jack was fairly puzzled, though he had an uncomfortable semi-consciousness that his new acquaintance was as it were playing ball with him, and getting some private fun out of the process. It was a way Wentworth had now and then, especially when, for some reason best known to himself, he wished to punish any one publicly. "I can parry most of Wentworth’s weapons," exclaimed an angry

victim on one occasion to himself, when he awoke tardily to the fact that he had been made to look foolish, "but I hate his toy stiletto." Why this incomprehensible person should have been moved to produce that much-disliked instrument on first encountering Mr. Arlingham was a mystery hard to be understood.

Jack laughed again. Not feeling capable of fighting Wentworth with his own weapons, he did not think it prudent to inquire too closely into the inner signification of that gentleman's remarks. So he merely said, by way of rejoinder, "Your brother has got hold of me on a semi-political pretext now. He is drawing up a petition he wants me to introduce into our neighbourhood, and push forward, and—and get signatures for, you know."

"I understand," said Wentworth. "What is the object in view?"

"It has something to do with a vast scheme of emigration that he is interested in and wants to make State-directed. I don't understand the details, but it seems all right. And Irvine is very anxious about it, as I dare say you know."

"His anxieties are legion, as is natural in a man who has taken all humanity to be his family," Wentworth replied. He and Arling-

ham had moved to a little distance from Irvine, so that the latter was out of reach of their conversation. "In this particular case, I believe he thinks the Government will not be moved to act except by a general appeal from the country, and that is why he is working specially hard in the matter. I am glad to find he is meeting with support in the country districts. You are a magistrate, I presume, Mr. Arlingham?" Jack assented. "Ah, I thought so."

The office of justice of the peace is an ancient and honourable office. Therefore, why one man should feel insulted because another man supposed him to hold it, is impossible to determine. Yet Jack Arlingham did feel himself insulted by the observation.

Fortunately at this moment Irvine brought his task to a conclusion. "I am sorry to have kept you both waiting," he said, coming up with a folded paper. "You will find the draft just as we agreed upon it, Arlingham."

"Oh, I didn't agree at all," said Jack good-humouredly. "I had no opinions to bring forward, and I was very glad to let you and Ferrars fight it out between you."

"Well, I am much obliged to you for taking the trouble to come here about it," said Irvine.

"Remember me to Ferrars; I suppose you will go down together. By the way, I hope I have not made you too late for your train."

"I am not going back to Eversleigh to-night. Muriel is in town for a week, staying at her aunt's, and I have got to present myself at a big dinner there this evening, worse luck! and be introduced to all the relations, and criticized all round. Good-bye, Irvine. Think of me with compassion!"

"I will endeavour to do so," said Irvine, with a smile that had a tinge of bitterness in it, as the men shook hands. Somewhat to Arlingham's surprise, Paul Wentworth abruptly offered his hand likewise.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Arlingham. Glad to have made your acquaintance."

Jack murmured something incoherent about reciprocating the gladness, and retired rather gratified at Wentworth's sudden cordiality. He had resented the unprovoked sarcasms addressed to himself, but he felt unwilling admiration for the man who had launched them.

There was nothing particularly cordial, however, in the look which Wentworth directed at his retreating figure, or in the tone of the question he put to his brother as soon as the

young man was out of earshot, "Who and what is your interesting friend?"

"Hardly to be called a friend. I knew him at Oxford; he was a private pupil of mine for a few months before he took his degree, and he is very intimate with young Ferrars, who has been working with us at Crum Street a good deal, on and off. They are near neighbours at home."

"He mentioned that he was a Holmshire man."

"Yes, he has a small place called Eversleigh, between Milford and Alderton. I believe he is a good sort of fellow, though not particularly clever."

"The latter point admits of no question," Wentworth remarked. "Why did he invoke your pity in such moving terms?"

"He is suffering from a fit of boyish shyness at the prospect of being presented to his future wife's relations. He is engaged to be married—to one of the Miss Ferrars of Alderton," added Irvine, looking keenly at his brother, as a flash of recollection crossed his memory.

His scrutiny was not repaid. "Poor fellow!" observed Wentworth calmly, flecking a speck of dust off his coat-sleeve. "I am sorry for him; that process of being trotted out for inspection

is a severe ordeal for ingenuous youth. Which sister is he going to marry?"

"The elder one. You know her, don't you? At least, I heard her say she had met you in Switzerland."

"I remember her perfectly. A pretty girl, but a little wanting in animation. In those days—it is more than a year since I met her—she went in for intellect, and had yearnings after the Higher Criticism, which I should think is hardly Mr. Arlingham's line, if I gauge him at all correctly. No doubt her tastes have changed with the revolving moons. When does the wedding come off?"

"Almost immediately, I believe. George Ferrars has got an appointment in India, and sails soon after Christmas, and they want to have the wedding over before he goes. By the way, perhaps you would not object to release me from the engagement I entered into last summer, about not mentioning our relationship to the Ferrars? I have found it an inconvenient promise to keep, and I fear I broke the spirit of it by introducing young Arlingham to you to-day."

"That is of no consequence at all," returned Wentworth lightly. "The reason which induced me to make such a request ceased to exist long

ago. It—expired, in fact, and so the whole thing slipped my memory. Consider yourself free of that embargo for ever." He set his foot on an unlucky, drowsy bluebottle fly which was crawling near, and crushed it ruthlessly, as if he took pleasure in the operation. "And now to my errand. I came to ask if you will dine with us to-night? It is not a party—only three other people besides yourself."

"I am not quite sure if I can manage it," Irvine responded doubtfully. "That is—unless Alice would excuse my leaving directly after dinner? She has come back, I suppose?"

"Yes, she arrived just before I came out. She wished me to say she hoped you would come. And she will not mind your leaving early; she knows your ways of old."

"Then I am happy to accept her invitation. And how is she? It seems a long time since she went away."

"Three months. Quite a formidable separation for man and wife," said Wentworth, with a laugh that was not particularly mirthful. "Alice has been making excellent use of her time since August. She has been to the Tyrol, Greece, Norway—no end of places; finishing up with a fortnight's yachting on the west coast of

Scotland. Well, the calls of business are imperative; good-bye for the present." And with a nod he was gone, leaving his brother lost in speculation as to whether Paul were really the most variable and incomprehensible of men, or only—a very consummate amateur actor?

Actor or not, Wentworth's start of surprise when, at the conclusion of a specially long and hard day's work, he entered his study at home and found his wife standing on the hearthrug, was far too natural to have been simulated. "Alice!" he exclaimed in genuine astonishment.

Alice turned round at the exclamation. She made a pleasant picture in the dancing firelight which illuminated the spacious room, and cast a fitful glow on oak and ebony, bronze and *bric-à-brac*—now revealing in a flash the soft, warm colouring of a Claude that hung above the book-case, now touching the heavy Oriental embroidery of a Persian *portière* into fantastic brilliancy—and of all the pretty things gathered there, she looked decidedly the prettiest. The heavy carved mantelpiece of blackened oak formed a delightful background to her graceful head with its coronet of bright hair; the leaping flames created all manner of delicious lights and shadows, fit to be the envy and the despair of any artist with

a true eye for colour, on the folds of her tea-gown of deep red plush; and her hands, on which, as the firelight rose and fell, many diamonds might be seen sparkling and scintillating, looked even whiter and smaller than usual under her wide hanging sleeves. The smile with which she greeted her husband put the finishing touch to this charming study in *chiaroscuro*.

"You are particularly late to-night," she said. "Of course, just because I wished you to be early. I was afraid I should have to go to dress before you came in, and I wanted so much to see you. I haven't yet congratulated you about the appointment, and I am really so pleased."

Wentworth's heart beat suddenly faster. How long was it since he had heard Alice's voice address him in that tone? Was it possible that after all——? Yet he answered composedly enough, "I am very glad if you are pleased. I fancied from your letter that you were gratified at the news."

"I am a great deal more than gratified," she replied; "I am simply delighted, and I am sure you more than deserve all your honours. They were chanting a perfect panegyric in your praise at Killiecraig. In fact"—laying her arm caress-

ingly on his shoulder, and just touching his dark cheek with her lips—"I am quite proud of you, sir!"

The unwonted tenderness, the unexpected caress broke down in a moment the barrier slowly and painfully erected by sixteen years of persistent coldness, and Wentworth forgot in the dawn of a wild and chimerical hope that this was any other than Alice Carew, his early love, as he had pictured her to himself in the days of implicit faith and measureless devotion. Was he on the point of realizing at last that old unforgotten dream? He clasped his wife in his arms. "What did you mean by that, Alice?" he asked breathlessly.

If there was one thing that Mrs. Wentworth disliked more than another, it was violent emotion of any kind. She shrank from an outbreak of feeling as some women shrink from the sight of horrible physical suffering or deformity—with repugnance, with positive loathing. She reproached herself for having foolishly provoked the present disagreeable manifestation, which she greatly resented, but as she was particularly anxious not to quarrel with her husband just then, she looked up smilingly into his face and answered sweetly, "I meant what I said, fully.

I think you have done yourself great credit, and I feel extremely proud of your new distinction."

"Nothing more?" urged Wentworth, feeling his heart sink at her light words.

"What more should I be likely to mean?" Alice inquired. She was a little afraid of her husband in this mood, and still more afraid that he was going to make what she called "a scene."

"What more?" he repeated. "A great deal more, Alice, if you meant to tell me—as I imagined—that you will forgive and forget all the miserable history of these last years, and let us begin a new life together. I know I have offended you most grievously, but oh, my darling, if you had not been so cold and hard to me, all would have been different. I have always loved you, even when you made me so wretched that I almost persuaded myself I hated you. Cannot you forgive and——"

At this point Alice disengaged herself gently but quite decidedly from her husband's arms. "My dear Paul," she said, putting one hand on his, "what nonsense this is! You must be ill, or overtired, or something; if you were a woman instead of a man, I should say you were hysterical. It is too ridiculous for people who have been married nearly seventeen years to begin

getting up scenes like a pair of quarrelsome lovers. I am not angry about anything; I have no complaint to make. On the contrary, I am feeling particularly pleased and amiable. Why on earth choose such a moment for raking up old grievances which had much better be allowed to sleep? You are really very unwise."

The light had faded from Wentworth's eyes, but his brief fit of madness was not quite over. "Are you so unforgiving, dear?" he pleaded. "If you would only hear——"

"No!" Alice interrupted, throwing up her head and speaking more sharply, "there I protest. I am a very tolerant person, I believe; I don't think my worst enemy would accuse me of being a jealous or an exacting wife, but I do object to receiving confessions. I must beg you to spare me that infliction at least."

"Pardon me," said Wentworth, with ashen lips, "but I think, whatever my errors, you might have trusted me to say nothing at variance with the respect I owe you. Perhaps you imagine that I was weaving a romance when I told you just now that it was your own indifference which brought about our first estrangement, and that through it all——"

"You have been madly in love with me!"

she interposed ironically. "Please don't let us have any more false sentiment—I hate it unfeignedly, and it does sit so badly upon you! No, my dear Paul; allow me to judge you a little more correctly than you judge yourself. If you have been madly in love with any one during the past fifteen years—which I take leave to doubt—it certainly was not with me."

Wentworth realized at last with entire completeness how hopeless was any appeal to his wife's heart; as well, he saw now, might he have flung himself against a wall of rock. "No," he said, with a return to his old bitter tone, "I believe you are right, Alice. It could not have been with you. With some ideal of mine that looked like you, perhaps, but with you yourself—decidedly not. Perhaps it is as well that I should have discovered the absurd mistake of which I have been guilty. A comedy of errors grows wearisome after a while."

His words galled her, cold as she was. In her mortification at having lost him, or her power over him—for it was somehow borne in upon her as he spoke that she had lost both once for all—she was nearer for a moment to loving him than she had ever been in her life before. But just then, unluckily, the reason which had impelled

her to seek an interview with her husband recurred to her mind, and swamped every other consideration. The feeble impulse that might have carried her towards him died away, giving place to a more pressing interest, and she only touched his arm playfully, remarking pleasantly by way of answer, "Come, don't let us quarrel this first evening, when I have come down with the express intention of saying only pretty things to you. You have been excessively rude, you know, but I will be magnanimous and say nothing further about that."

"I beg your pardon," said Wentworth stiffly. He fell silently into his favourite position by the mantelpiece, while Alice sank into an arm-chair opposite, and leaned back placidly looking at him, with her slender fingers lying crossed in her lap and the firelight playing becomingly on her rich dress and her bright hair. What a picture she made! thought the man whose life she had helped to ruin morally, and whose heart she had once gone very near to breaking. But he added to himself, "A picture, and nothing more; as beautiful and as unfeeling as the Guercino over the doorway."

Finding that her husband showed no intention of breaking the awkward silence which pre-

vailed, Mrs. Wentworth boldly took the initiative. "You have not told me how you got on at the banquet," she observed.

Wentworth might and did feel profound astonishment at his wife's airy dismissal of a subject involving the issues of life and death to his mind, and at her utter insensibility to the storm which had shaken his nature to its foundations, but he was too proud to do anything but follow her lead. "Oh, particularly well," he replied carelessly. "Every one was very pleasant, and as Crichton took the chair, I was very delicately incensed. By the way, I suppose you met the Maitland Crichtons in Argyllshire?"

Here was the very opening Alice wanted. She was not slow to seize it. "Yes, they joined us off Mull, and spent a week on board the *Sunflower*, and then Lady Fergus, Mrs. Maitland Crichton's mother, insisted on our all coming to her for two days at Killiecraig Castle. I never enjoyed two days more in my life: such magnificent Highland hospitality! All the luxury and refinement of the south, with a unique touch of romance and local colouring in addition. And Lady Fergus is a perfect hostess."

"I met her at dinner once somewhere, and she seemed to be a clever woman, with a good deal of artistic taste."

"I thought she gave evidence of good taste, of course, for she took a violent fancy to me," Alice returned, laughing a little—a rather forced, nervous laugh. "We struck up quite a friendship, and she actually proposed my joining her expedition to Paris next month. Quite seriously; it was a *bonâ fide* invitation. She heads a party of about ten to spend four weeks at the Bristol, staying over New Year's Day. When she first asked me to go with her, I assure you I did not know whether to feel most surprised or flattered."

"Have you accepted the invitation?"

"Well, I did not refuse it. I am not positively pledged to go, you understand."

"Oh, I understand!" Wentworth retorted quickly. "I understand several things which I hardly knew how to account for a minute ago, but which are as clear as daylight now. There is a difficulty in your way as regards money, I suppose? Otherwise you might easily have entered into a more binding engagement with Lady Fergus, if it pleased you to do so."

Alice winced in the darkness. The room was now full of ghostly shadows through which carven cabinets and brodered hangings loomed faint or grim, for the fire had burnt hollow and the sinking embers gave out but little light.

"It will cost something, of course," she murmured almost timidly.

"It stands to reason that it must cost a good deal. But I do not wish to prevent your going, if you specially desire to go."

"That is very nice of you," Alice responded. "I own I do very much desire to keep up my friendship with Lady Fergus, and I will not make any very exorbitant demand upon the exchequer."

"Anything in reason can be managed, I dare say, only you must remember that there is a point beyond which you cannot go." He stirred the fire, and looked at his watch. "Do you know how late it is?—twenty minutes to eight. You will scarcely have time to get ready for dinner."

"I must make haste," she answered, but she did not seem disposed to carry her words into effect. She made her way slowly across the room, hesitating once or twice, and glancing back at the motionless figure on the hearthrug. Was she reluctant to go away? She had gained all she came for; was it possible that in the very moment of success she was vaguely discontented at having won her point so easily—half disappointed that her husband had made no objection to her leaving him again so soon?

At the door she halted again for an instant. Was it only feminine artifice, an instinct of courtesy, or—as Wentworth was fain to hope afterwards—some faint stirring of softer feeling, which prompted her to say, “I think you are ever so good about this trip to Paris, Paul. I am really very much obliged to you.”

He started slightly, for he had not known she was still there. A bitter rejoinder was on his lips, but something seemed to check him and urge him not to give it voice. A very little later, he was glad to remember that he had left it unuttered. “I hope you may enjoy it,” he answered, with half a sigh; and Alice passed out.

* * * * *

Six weeks later, a new year had broken upon the world. It was an ideal New Year's Day. The snow lay thick and soft and pure on the Holmshire hills; the roads were hard and crisp to the tread; the trees were clothed with a white and dazzling vesture more beautiful even than their summer dress; and the last rays of the low winter sun looked through the great west window of the library at Eversleigh Grange on a pretty domestic scene. Muriel Arlingham, a bride of three weeks' standing, with that broad unfamiliar gold circlet conspicuous on her left hand, was

hovering about a pretty little table laden with flowers, and arranging the vases which stood upon it in different fanciful ways, while her young husband knelt before the fire, actively superintending the education of a promising fox-terrier puppy.

"Now he'll do it, Muriel, see! What will you do for the queen, sir? Good dog—no! Little brute! that's the fiftieth time he has moved at the last moment."

"He'll never do it," said Muriel, with feminine lack of patience.

"He *shall*—if I keep him at it till midnight! Two mortal hours I've been drilling him now," quoth Jack in wrath.

"Do you really think it is worth while to take so much trouble about it?" inquired his wife quietly.

"I'm sure I don't know, darling, but anyhow I don't choose to be beaten, after having once begun. Of course you would have given up the job in disgust long ago—women never can manage a dog. There! the little wretch is keeping one eye open to look at you now! Just move a little, there's a good child."

"I'll turn my chair round, and bury myself in the *Times*," answered Muriel complaisantly,

suiting the action to the word. "So—now neither master nor pupil can say I am disturbing the course of instruction."

"You can tell me if there is any news," observed Jack presently. "I haven't looked at a paper to-day myself."

"There is nothing very particular here, I think. Things seem much the same on the Continent; rather a better prospect of peace, perhaps. And the report of Lord Lyster's resignation is confirmed. That is a pity."

"Anything about the boat-race? Down, Racket! down, sir! Lie still this moment!"

"No—yes. Where is it? Oh, here. 'Mr. Langland has injured his knee by a fall on the ice, and it is feared he will be unable to row this term.'"

"Horrid sell!" muttered Jack. "Why was the fellow such an ass as to skate, with so much depending upon him, if he couldn't do it well enough to keep upright? Now, Racket, what will you do for the queen? Ah, bravo! well done, good dog! Look here, Muriel!"

No response. "Muriel!" said her husband again.

She started round to where the little terrier lay stretched out stiff and motionless, simulating

death after the most approved pattern of canine loyalty. What was this curious change which had passed over her face in the space of a few seconds ?

Whatever its cause, Jack did not appear to notice it. "He has learnt his lesson perfectly at last," he remarked in triumph, gazing admiringly at the dog. "Now you shall do it again for your mistress to see, Racket. What will you—— Muriel, you're not attending!"

"Oh yes, I am attending, dear," she answered hurriedly. "How nicely he does it, Jack! Good Racket! capital dog! you do your tutor great credit. Come and be rewarded with biscuits immediately."

She was down on her knees in another moment, laughing and playing with the puppy. Why should she not laugh and play? Of what possible concern or interest to her could be the three lines in the *Times'* obituary which had accidentally attracted her eye as she glanced down the columns in search of news ?

"December 29th, at the Hôtel Bristol, Paris, the result of injuries received in a fall from her horse on the previous day, Alice, the wife of Paul Wentworth, Esq., Q.C., aged 35."



CHAPTER XII.

THE SCENE CHANGES.

“Was she content, content with ocean’s sound
Which dashed its mocking infinite around
One thirsty for a little love?”

E. B. BROWNING.

TWICE again New Year’s Day had come and gone, and now winter was fast passing into spring. The London flower-girls were everywhere crying violets and primroses “only one penny the bunch,” and holding out the first golden Lent lilies to tempt the passers-by; the Park borders were gay with many-hued crocuses, and overhead the horse-chestnuts and plantains were pushing out great buds and showing here and there a delicate shoot of vivid green. The sunshine was brilliant; the wind, for a March wind, not specially keen; and the multitudes who had flocked early to town, either because the duties of the session summoned them thither,

or simply because they desired to enjoy that foretaste of the season which comes before Easter, seemed to be finding Lent in the metropolis a very tolerable time of year.

Among these harbingers of fashion was young Mrs. Arlingham, who had suddenly, and almost to her own bewilderment, become a figure of some importance in that great small world of society to which her very name had been unknown a year before. When she looked round her beautiful house at Rutland Gate, and reminded herself that she was a wealthy woman, a generally admired beauty, and—as she said with a touch of self-scorning—“quite a person of social consequence altogether,” she found it hard to realize her identity with the Muriel Ferrars of three years ago. But she did not really care to institute the comparison. It is only the very happy who can afford to indulge in close self-scrutiny and prolonged retrospect.

And Muriel Arlingham was not happy, although most people considered that she possessed everything necessary for happiness. She was young and endowed with admirable health; she was rich enough to surround herself with luxuries and delights such as at one time she had never even dreamt of enjoying; she was

beautiful and clever, and knew that her beauty and cleverness were every day more admired and appreciated by people well qualified to judge of both gifts. In short, Muriel was on the high road to become a social success; but she found that her growing triumphs left her heart still full of unsatisfied cravings. Through all the texture of her daily existence ran the fatal flaw of a mistaken marriage.

That her marriage had been a mistake she discovered before she had been Arlingham's wife six months. From the first, she had not deceived him or herself as to the nature of her own calm affection, but she had been terribly deceived in the nature of his regard for her. This was scarcely to be wondered at. How could she guess that his natural obstinacy, and a set determination not to yield to his mother's threats and entreaties, had supplied one of the principal motives for his persistent suit, or that simple pique at her manifest indifference to his desertion was the chief reason that had brought him finally to her feet? And then her estimate of his character had been erroneous throughout. She had never suspected the profound depths of self-seeking which his frank manner concealed so well, or the utter want of feeling which really

lay at the root of his lack of social tact and courtesy, and of his frequent disregard of those little amenities which do so much towards softening and sweetening human intercourse. These shortcomings she had always set down to the score of his simplicity or of his inability to express the sympathy he must surely feel—never to the real cause, an absolute hardness of nature that made him careless how he wounded his neighbours' susceptibilities. And it was not till after she became his wife that she learnt that the outspokenness which was often so ruthless of other people's feelings proceeded from sheer want of heart, and that the lack of consideration in small things, which she had deemed a venial failing, was the result of a selfishness so unblushing that it never troubled itself about conventional disguises.

Of course Muriel did not tell herself all this in so many words. She refused resolutely and loyally to see the truth for a long time, just as she resolutely and loyally strove to blind herself to another fact which was every day growing more unmistakably clear—the fact that Jack's first ardent love was waning and lessening, until it had well-nigh sunk into mere tolerant indifference. Gradually, however, she had to

admit silently that all the hopes she had cherished of being her young husband's close friend and helpmate were at an end, that her influence with him was steadily declining, and that the more desperately she strove to retain his affection, the faster did it seem to slip from her hold. The evil day came at last, when she had to acknowledge to herself that her venture had failed. The simple honest love in which she had sought refuge after the heart-breaking experience of her early girlhood had likewise proved itself a miserable illusion and an ignoble cheat; she had staked her last card in the game of life, and lost it. She had given away her future as well as her present, and received less than nothing in return.

And in her case there was not even a past to which she could look back. Her past was buried for ever, and she refused even to glance at its dishonoured grave. If its ghost did for a moment start up before her on reading the announcement of Alice Wentworth's sudden death, the spectre was quickly exorcised, and was never suffered to appear again. Her heart was empty; the idol she had once set up there had been cast out, and she only asked for a little love and kindness to fill the great void left after that terrible cleans-

ing of the temple. Wentworth had done his best to spoil her life; but it is possible that a tender hand, even had it been a clumsy one, might yet have been able to gather together the fragments of faith and hope which he had recklessly shattered, and rebuild the ruin after a fashion. Cruelly as Jack had disappointed her, Muriel would have forgiven him everything for the sake of a little love. It was a bitter moment when she discovered that he had finally ceased to love her.

The truth was, she wearied him. The intellectual and moral superiority that had fascinated him in the queen of his almost hopeless fancy annoyed and oppressed him in his wife. By merely consenting to become his wife, Muriel had lost half her charm for him—as soon as the idol leant towards him from its pedestal, he ceased to worship it. The prize he had won seemed hardly worth so much trouble and so many sacrifices after all, and the first spark of discontent in his mind was fostered and fanned into flame by his mother. Mrs. Arlingham had affected to reconcile herself to her son's marriage, but in her heart she had never forgiven it, and under all her surface frankness and good nature lay concealed a hearty and vindictive dislike

to her daughter-in-law. She still continued to make one of the Eversleigh household, knowing well that if she removed her influence to a distance, the power she still exercised over her son would be greatly weakened, and if all else had gone smoothly, her presence at Eversleigh would have been fatal to Muriel's hopes of happiness. Never did she suffer Jack to forget what he had resigned, or might suppose himself to have resigned, in order to marry Muriel Ferrars; and as the companionship of his young wife grew burdensome to him, Jack was easily brought to see how dire had been his error. And Muriel's companionship did become very burdensome to her husband before many months were over. He became uneasily sensible of his own intellectual failings in her presence, contemptuous of the interests which engaged *her* thoughts and were either meaningless or tiresome to *him*, less and less inclined to seek her sympathy on those subjects which were at first their common meeting ground. It was in vain that Muriel bravely threw aside the pursuits she loved best, and gave herself up entirely to those which interested her husband. Whether he surmised and resented the effort that such an attempt cost her, or whether his mother, per-

ceiving the little rift between the two, exerted herself to widen the breach, it is difficult to say, but certainly poor Muriel's endeavours to heal it availed only to increase the original evil. There was no quarrel between her and Jack, no open estrangement, yet every day they drifted further apart. Soon Muriel found herself necessary to no one at Eversleigh. If Jack had a matter of business on hand, he consulted his mother; if he wished to relax what he was pleased to call his mind by indulging in conversation on the topics dearest to his heart—vivid anticipations of mighty bags in the autumn, or regretful recollections of brilliant runs enjoyed in his more opulent bachelor days—he did not address himself to his wife, but to his cousin Dorothy Cochrane, a far more appreciative listener, who knew how to sit a horse in sportswoman-like fashion, adored all his terriers, and thought a good afternoon's ratting the best fun in the world.

Matters might have gone on thus for an indefinite length of time, but for a great change which came over this young hero's fortunes. One fine morning, about a year after his marriage, Jack awoke to find himself a rich man. By one of those romantic freaks of Fortune which now

and then astonish this prosaically ordered world, there had died in Australia a mighty sheep-farmer, leaving behind him a great heap of gold with no heir forthcoming to claim it, until it was discovered that he had been a distant cousin of the late Mr. Geoffrey Arlingham, and that the younger Geoffrey, now reigning at Eversleigh, was his heir-at-law.

Jack the small and struggling country gentleman and Jack the absolute master of many thousands a year in shares and bonds were two very different men, it appeared. As soon as he found himself pecuniarily independent, he showed his mother plainly, not to say harshly, that the days of her ascendancy were over for ever, intimating plainly that henceforward neither her wishes nor her advice would have any weight with him. As Mrs. Arlingham had sown, so she reaped. There had never been much real affection existing between her and her son, although the tie of a common interest had bound them so closely together all their lives; and when that tie snapped, her hold on Jack was gone.

Muriel, on the other hand, suddenly rose to renewed importance in her husband's eyes. He had conceived a secret ambition to emerge from his modest sphere in Holmshire, and to make

himself a footing in London society, and he looked to her to help him in his scheme. Of course he did not expect to accomplish this daring flight without extraneous assistance. But his mother had a distant relative who might lend this assistance if she chose, and although Lady Ellesthorpe had never pretended to like Jack, she had been pleased on one or two occasions to look with extreme graciousness on his lovely young wife.

To this lady, then, did Jack betake himself for counsel and help in his enterprise, and received both in a measure beyond his hopes. Lady Ellesthorpe had taken a fancy to Muriel, and liked the idea of launching a new and totally unknown beauty on society—especially as the beauty was already provided with a husband, and she need not therefore dread a future plague of ineligible or fortune-hunting suitors. Her lord was a Cabinet Minister who scarcely ever saw his wife except in public, her own daughters were all married, and Muriel promised to be at once an interest and an amusement to her.

On the whole, Muriel could not have fallen into better hands than those of the clever, kindly woman of the world who became her chief friend and protectress, for Lady Ellesthorpe's social

gifts rested on a firm basis of right principle, and her heart was as sound and warm as her intellect was shrewd and polished. She had a deep sense of honour and a high ideal of womanly perfection, which made her a particularly safe guide for a young and inexperienced creature like Muriel, and her first slight fancy for her *protégée* soon ripened into genuine affection. Her penetrating eyes speedily discovered Muriel's secret dissatisfaction and loneliness of heart, and though she took the utmost care that this discovery of hers should remain unguessed by Muriel herself, yet she often comforted and braced her by her unspoken sympathy, and that too when seemingly engaged only in choosing furniture, sketching out entertainments, or planning designs for gowns and bonnets. In the same unobtrusive manner did she watch over her after she was fairly started on her social career, pointing out the rocks ahead, and guiding her over shoals and quicksands which a less experienced pilot might have neglected to indicate. To Lady Ellesthorpe's wise counsels, quite as much as to her own natural gifts, was due the undoubted triumph which attended Muriel's first entry into the great world.

I am not going to deny that Muriel enjoyed

this triumph of hers. She was still very young, and at two and twenty it is always pleasant to find one's self generally admired. Perhaps if she had been less saddened and sobered by the cruel sorrows of her girlhood and the bitter disappointments of her married life, she might even have found her successes a little intoxicating; as it was, though they served to distract and amuse her, they failed—as Lady Ellesthorpe was glad to see—to turn her head in the smallest degree. At first a faint hope crept into her heart that this great change in their lives—perhaps even the admiration she herself excited—might prove the means of reviving her husband's regard for her; but this hope was doomed to speedy extinction, like its predecessors. Jack was indeed pleased at every fresh proof of his wife's social success, but merely because it reflected additional lustre on himself, and helped him to advance a rung higher on the ladder he was so desirous of climbing. To Muriel herself he remained profoundly indifferent, and the new excitements, occupations, and friendships which wealth and position brought with them only served to wean him from her more entirely.

Having quietly buried that last hope of hers, Muriel deliberately set herself to take life as she

found it—a fact to be accepted, to be endured, and even to be enjoyed where enjoyment of it was possible, but never to be reflected upon, analysed, or reasoned about. Why insist on going below the surface of things when keeping to the surface was so much less painful? She was conscientious in her performance of all such wifely duties as her husband still deigned to accept at her hands; she did not forget the lessons of charity and usefulness learnt in her early home; she resumed her discarded pursuits and studies, and took great pains to play her new part in the world aright. She was always occupied from morning till night, and she never paused to ask herself whether she were happy or not.

Doubtless the world at large considered Mrs. Arlingham a highly fortunate and enviable young woman, and perhaps even among her intimates it would have been difficult to find any one ready to controvert the general opinion, if we except the two persons whom alone of all her acquaintance Muriel dignified by the title of friends. One of these persons was Lady Elles-thorpe; the other was Margaret Irvine.

Between Muriel Arlingham and Philip Irvine's sister a mutual liking had at once sprung up.

Irvine himself never called upon Mrs. Arlingham—an omission she was at a loss to account for satisfactorily—but towards the end of Muriel's first season in town he had requested his sister to do so, and Margaret readily complying, her first formal visit laid the foundation of an acquaintance which speedily developed into something more. Miss Irvine was an observant woman, and her natural acuteness had been sharpened by eight and thirty years of constant intercourse with the world under many aspects, so it was not long before she weighed Jack Arlingham in the balances of her judgment and found him woefully wanting. She gauged his wife's character with equal nicety, calling her own experience to her aid in order to ensure a correct performance of that more difficult operation. Like most people who have reached her years, Margaret "had had her story," and by the light of that secret history she read unerringly much that might otherwise have remained dark to her in the pages of Muriel's life.

During the winter months, while Muriel had been absent in the country, she lost sight of Miss Irvine, but on her return to town in the early spring the two met again with unfeigned pleasure. So it came to pass that on this

particular March day of which I have written, Mrs. Arlingham started off in her brougham soon after one o'clock for Miss Irvine's little house in Mayfair. "Come and have luncheon with me quietly," Margaret had said. "It is my only chance of seeing you without fear of interruption."

Margaret's house was well situated, and most artistically decorated, draped, and furnished, but in size it was a mere bandbox. For a solitary woman the diminutive rooms, crowded as they were with all manner of things pretty and pleasant to look upon, were more cheerful and cosy than great unpeopled spaces, and Margaret averred that she preferred her tiny drawing-rooms to anything larger and loftier. But she never ceased to mourn over the miseries of a cramped entrance and a narrow staircase.

The latter inconvenience was forcibly demonstrated to Muriel on her arrival, when, half-way upstairs, she found herself confronted by two young persons who were descending rather boisterously. Of necessity she paused, uncertain whether to advance or retreat, since to pass, except on the landing, seemed impossible.

The girls on their way down—two slim, long-limbed creatures of about fourteen and fifteen,

with masses of floating hair under sailor hats, and skirts of indefinite length which had been rather outgrown by the wearers—looked equally irresolute for a moment. Then the elder, who was considerably taller and more womanly than her sister—being dressed alike, they were presumably sisters—whispered imperiously to the smaller maiden, and drew her back into a corner of the landing to make room for the visitor.

Muriel mutely acknowledged the girl's courtesy as she went by, and received in return a scrutinizing glance from a pair of great dark eyes—eyes altogether startling when found in conjunction with such bright chestnut hair and such pink and white cheeks as distinguished the young lady to whom they belonged. There was something inexplicably familiar to Muriel about those eyes, yet she felt pretty certain that she had never seen either of the children before. She was a little curious to learn who they were.

Just before the luncheon bell rang, she mentioned her encounter to Miss Irvine. "I met two very nice-looking children, or perhaps I ought rather to call them young girls, on the stairs just now. I don't believe I ever saw them before, but the elder one reminded me strongly of some one—I cannot now think of whom."

"Hardly of me," said Margaret, smiling pleasantly—her face was a soft feminine replica of Irvine's—"nor yet of Philip, though they are our nieces. You will see them again presently—they are my eldest brother's children, and he has left them with me while he is abroad."

"Your brother's children! But I always fancied that Mr. Irvine—Mr. Philip Irvine—was your only brother?"

"So he is, in the fullest sense. Paul—Mr. Wentworth—is my half-brother. I dare say you know his name," Margaret added with a touch of pride.

Mrs. Arlingham paused for a few seconds before she replied, "Yes, I know his name well. Every one does, I think. Besides, I met him abroad several years ago—some time before I was married. But I had no idea that he was related to you."

"How strange that you should have met him! Another illustration of the truism that the world is a very small and round place. Where did you two make acquaintance—for I hope you know my brother further than by sight only?"

"We became acquainted by accident. My uncle, with whom I was travelling, had chanced to meet Mr. Wentworth previously at Oxford,

and we happened to take up our quarters in the same hotel on the Lake of Lucerne for a time."

"I am glad to think you do know him," Margaret said. "I wish I had known this sooner; it is a kind of additional link to draw us together. But I wonder you did not hear of the relationship through Philip."

Muriel shared in the wonder, but held her peace.

"You have never met Paul since that time, I suppose?" the sister went on.

"No, never. I think some one told me he was in America all last season."

"Quite true; and he has not been in England, except for a few weeks, since. About a year after my sister-in-law's death—you may have heard that he lost his wife in a very sad and sudden way rather more than two years ago—my brother's health broke down completely in consequence of overwork, and he decided to throw up his practice at the Bar, and see what travel would do for him. It was a sort of shock to us all, his stopping midway in his career, for he was within measurable distance of the Solicitor-Generalship; but he never cared much for legal honours, and when he comes back, I think there may be other work awaiting him.

He is too active-minded to endure an idle life."

"We have not too many brains among us," said Muriel. "I think all those who possess any are bound to use them for their neighbours' benefit."

"And my brother is perfectly well now—just as strong as ever, he says in his letters—so I see no reason why he should not put his shoulder to the wheel again. He has written a good deal lately, but only in a desultory sort of way, and I should be glad to see him at work on something more definite. Besides, his children want him sorely at home. Poor darlings! they have been doubly orphaned during this past year. When my brother is with them, I think he hardly lets them feel that there can be a want in their lives."

"I have often heard him speak of them," Muriel said, with a slight effort. "We used to say, I recollect, that we had never known any *man* so wrapped up in his children—it seemed more like a mother's devotion."

"So it is," replied Margaret. "There are few men who can be father and mother both to their children, but my brother is one of those few. When my sister-in-law died, it seemed as if the

blank she left was not half as great as it ought to have been—Paul filled the void so completely himself. Poor Alice! it was a sad ending to such a bright, prosperous life.”

“It was—very sad. I never heard any details of the accident, but I believe she died almost immediately afterwards?”

“Yes, she only lingered a few hours, and never recovered consciousness. My brother started the moment the telegram reached him—she was staying in Paris with friends, and he was in London—and he arrived there just two hours before the end. But she could not speak, and did not seem to recognize him.”

Just then the gong gave the signal for luncheon, and interrupted the conversation.

“We shall find the girls in the dining-room,” said Margaret, rising. “By the way, I suppose the familiar look of Stella’s face to your eye is due to her likeness to her father. She often reminds me of him as far as expression is concerned, though she has her mother’s colouring.”

Two minutes later, Muriel found herself shaking hands with Paul Wentworth’s young daughters; and when Stella again fixed her with a clear unwavering gaze, calmly scrutinizing and silently appraising her new acquaintance, it was no

longer difficult to decide what was the shadowy remembrance the first sight of her had called up.

"Mrs. Arlington knows your father, Stella," Margaret said, as they took their places. "She has met him abroad."

Stella leant eagerly across the table.

"How long ago was it, Mrs. Arlington? Please tell us all about it; it is so long since he went away, and we want so to know how he is looking!"

"I am afraid I cannot give you any news of your father," answered Muriel, smiling a little. "I have not seen him for years now."

Stella sighed deeply. "That is dreadfully disappointing," she rejoined. "I thought perhaps you had been in America lately, and had met him there."

"You miss him very much, no doubt?"

"Miss him!" ejaculated the girl sorrowfully. "We have been perfectly miserable all these long months without him—I hardly know how we have managed to get on at all! No offence, Aunt Margaret"—with a saucy nod to her *vis-à-vis*. But her eyes were full of tears as she spoke.

"I understand, my dear," said Margaret softly, and quietly turned the conversation. Nor was Wentworth's name mentioned again till just as

Muriel was bidding her friend adieu. Then Margaret asked, "Do you consider my niece Stella like her father on a nearer view?"

"Certainly, in some ways. Hardly in feature, perhaps, but in expression very like indeed."

"The likeness is chiefly in the eyes, I fancy. Don't you think she has his eyes exactly?"

Yes, Muriel quite agreed with Miss Irvine on that point too, but she could not stay to discuss it. She had a great many engagements that afternoon, and the horses had been kept standing some time already.





CHAPTER XIII.

A CHANCE ACQUAINTANCE.

“They seemed to those who saw them meet
Mere casual friends of every day.”

HUGHTON.

It was the end of the second week in May. The season was in full swing after the Easter holidays, and entertainments multiplied nightly. Three especially “smart” parties had been fixed to take place on the tenth, but of these Lady Beatrice Orme’s reception, the second her vivacious little ladyship had held that season, was indubitably the most important event. Not only would all the smart people be there, but others who had something besides their smartness to recommend them; for Lady Beatrice was a little of a political hostess, and her husband’s colleagues in the Government and his supporters on the Liberal benches generally made a point of showing themselves in her drawing-rooms as often

as she threw them open. Then she dabbled in literature; so the republic of letters was usually well represented at her house—with now and then a famous scientific light or a celebrated traveller thrown in, to give added piquancy to the heterogeneous mixture which she took unfeigned delight in concocting and stirring together, after the manner of an approved mistress in the art of social cookery.

Lady Beatrice was in particularly good spirits on the evening of this tenth of May. Everybody she wanted to see in her rooms was coming, and the few guests unwillingly or doubtfully bidden had obligingly elected to stay away. It is true that a famous soldier, who was to have graced the dinner party preceding the reception with his presence, had had to excuse himself at the eleventh hour, having been unexpectedly summoned to Devonshire on urgent family business; but, by unexampled good fortune, his distracted hostess had been able to fill his place to her entire satisfaction. Indeed, she was rather glad than otherwise that Sir Grant Carey had disappointed her. Though undoubtedly brilliant in the field, his brilliancy did not extend to his conversation, and Lady Beatrice knew that the distinguished civilian who had consented to

cover his retreat would more than atone for the General's absence in this respect at least.

It was just a quarter past eight when this gentleman arrived, the last of the assembled guests. Lady Beatrice met him with a certain amount of effusion, and detained him beside her during the interval which preceded the announcement of dinner.

"You must let me bid you welcome, Mr. Wentworth," she said in her pretty, gracious way—at six and thirty Lady Beatrice was still a very charming woman, and never forgot to say exactly the right thing to every one. "We had all begun to think that your back was for ever turned upon these shores, so it is a double pleasure to find that your love of country exists still."

"I am sorry you should have thought so ill of me," Paul Wentworth replied. "I hardly deserved this at your hands, Lady Beatrice, for I have been busy promoting the country's welfare—according to our joint ideas—down in Westshire, ever since I returned to my native land a fortnight ago."

"I have heard all about that. It was ever so good of you to come back and contest that unlucky constituency on such a hasty summons—I

am sure the party ought to be sensible of all it owes you. Mr. Orme is growing quite hopeful about the Coln election since you consented to stand. But I'm afraid it is rather uphill work, isn't it?"

"Pretty well. If we win, it will only be after a tough fight; but I hazard no prophecies. In these days it is impossible to predict with any sort of certainty how matters will go in the end; and the Tory Democrat the Carlton people have sent down is a very clever fellow, and knows how to put himself in touch with a manufacturing population."

"Well, we shall be looking anxiously for the telegrams on Tuesday week," said Lady Beatrice, "but I venture to be more sanguine in my expectations than you. Mr. Orme will tell you—— No, you need not look round for him; he is not here yet. A messenger came from the Colonial Office just now with a telegraphic despatch requiring immediate answer, and he is engaged upon that. The chief is laid up again with bronchitis, and is too ill to attend to anything, however important."

"Poor Elsmere! he is half his time *hors de combat*. It sounds cruel to say so, but we really need a robust man for the post. I think there

must be a shuffling of cards before long; there seems a general consensus of opinion on that subject."

Lady Beatrice wore a gratified air, as if she detected some undercurrent of flattering meaning in Wentworth's words. "Have you been at the Reform since you came up?" she asked, with sparkling eyes.

"I looked in for half an hour last night, that is all. I only arrived at Euston by the 7.40 train."

"Really? Then it was extra kind of you to come to us on such brief notice. And by way of reward, I am going to give you the new beauty to take down to dinner. You cannot have seen her yet, so I shall have the satisfaction of performing the introduction."

"Which new beauty?" inquired Wentworth, with only a languid show of interest. "There seem to be so many fresh stars this season."

"Perhaps I ought not to have called this star a new one, for she made her first appearance above the horizon last year. This spring she is approaching the zenith of her triumphs, to carry on the astronomical metaphor. Turn this way, please, and you will behold the fair luminary. —Mrs. Arlingham, let me introduce Mr. Wentworth to you."

Then Wentworth saw before him a reality like and yet unlike the vision that had never quite ceased to haunt his memory. The sweet promise of the girl's early years had ripened into rare and delicate loveliness in the woman, and there was an air of regal grace about Muriel's tall figure now which was new to his eyes. Yet the face was still the face of Muriel Ferrars—only infinitely more beautiful.

Nobody makes scenes nowadays—in public, at least. Muriel, who had been armed at all points in preparation for this moment for months, and who had had some minutes in which to look to her defences, was as calm as a summer morning. Wentworth, who was not prepared at all, looked slightly startled, but not startled enough for Lady Beatrice to observe his change of countenance. Only as he recovered from his formal bow, and his hostess turned away, his eyes involuntarily asked a hesitating question.

Mrs. Arlingham did not hesitate at all in her reply. She gave a slow, faint smile, charming enough in its way, but quite unfamiliar to Wentworth—she had learnt it after she ceased to know him—and put out her hand. "I think we have met before," she said. "Very likely,

though, you hardly remember me. It is years since."

Certainly she was changed, more changed than his first glance had told him. But if she felt perfectly callous concerning that brief episode in their past lives, the remembrance of which had made him diffident of claiming her acquaintance, why should the recollection trouble him any longer? He was quite ready to meet her half-way.

"I remember quite distinctly having the pleasure of meeting you abroad with Professor and Mrs. Erskine," he replied. "In Switzerland, was it not? You were only a child then, of course, but you are so little altered that I recognized you instantly."

Wentworth was over-doing his part a little, as impulsive men, not usually given to acting, are apt to do in such circumstances as his.

"How differently the same sentiments strike one's ear at different periods of one's existence!" said Muriel. "I dare say if you had told me—let me see, four years ago, was it, or five?—that you considered me 'only a child,' I should have been terribly offended. Now I take it as a compliment that you should say so—quite the prettiest compliment you could have paid me."

"It has the additional merit of being unconscious," retorted Wentworth, apparently slightly nettled. "People who know me well, Mrs. Arlingham, will tell you that I am incapable of paying a compliment. I don't understand the accomplishment."

"Perhaps you have picked it up during your prolonged wanderings in the other hemisphere," Muriel returned lightly. "Americans are supposed to cultivate it with peculiar success. Ah, there is our host at last, for which let us be joyful. Of all dreary moments, I think a protracted moment of suspense before dinner is quite the dreariest."

"Some Gordian knot of policy has been unravelled—perhaps some interesting aboriginal tribe has been placed under the fostering care of the British Lion, while we have been enduring penance overhead," Wentworth remarked, giving her his arm. "Let us hope so at least, for our consolation. That ought to be compensation sufficient, you know; unless you are of that selfish order of beings who decline to be comforted in the midst of their sufferings by the cheering reflection that 'somewhere the sun is shining'?"

"Meaning," said Muriel, "that I ought to be

able to bear my headache or toothache with equanimity, if supported by the consideration that my next-door neighbour is in perfect health and spirits?"

"Precisely so. You apprehend me exactly. I recommend you to bring the idea—which is highly philosophical—into play next time you are attacked by the ailments you have mentioned. A grain of practice is worth a bushel of theory."

"I will endeavour to do so without fail. I promise all the more readily, as I feel no threatening of such woes at present."

"So I should suppose. Will you accuse me of attempting another compliment if I say that apparently the world has worn well with you in all ways since I saw you last? Or may I tender my congratulations?"

"Certainly—and consider them accepted with thanks, please. I wish I could think of something appropriate to say in return, but ideas fail me for the moment. Will you try and imagine all the polite and pretty things I ought to say if I were equal to the occasion?"

"They shall be taken as said," Wentworth responded gravely, "after the fashion of loyal corporation addresses. And now let me return thanks according to the same pattern."

“If all ceremonies could be as easily abridged, what a deliverance for long-suffering humanity!” observed Muriel, unfolding her serviette with a satisfied air. She was really feeling not a little proud of herself. In spite of her dignified manner, she still suffered occasionally from timidity; and she had always secretly dreaded this meeting, fearing lest, when actually face to face with Wentworth, she should fail of showing just the proper amount of easy indifference—so her own coolness under the ordeal (and she was able to assure herself without flattery that she really had been very cool indeed) was a great source of satisfaction to her. When you have once weakly allowed a man to think you have a regard for him, it is often difficult to persuade him that you have completely changed your mind; and Muriel, having changed hers, was naturally anxious that Wentworth should be made fully cognizant of the change. But to effect this purpose, it was necessary that she should appear as indifferent as she felt, since the smallest sign of confusion, or even of natural annoyance at being reminded of a foolish bygone episode in her early life, would be certain to be misinterpreted by the quondam hero of that unpleasant and humiliating little story.

"You are campaigning down in Westshire, are you not?" she said presently, turning back to Wentworth after a lively skirmish with the genial bishop who was her right-hand neighbour. "You are a bold man to have attacked the Tory giant in his own stronghold."

"The fierceness of the struggle adds to the zest of the thing," Wentworth replied. "Perhaps the extreme uncertainty of the issue does the same. When up to the last moment in a contest you feel utterly at sea as to whether your side is going to pull off the victory or not, it makes you all the keener to win. I at least should like to win at Coln, very much."

"I hope you may," said Muriel. "Every seat is of such consequence just now, when so much depends on strengthening the hands of the Government. Besides, a victory in Westshire would have a certain effect all through the country. I am afraid, however, there was a terribly solid Tory majority at the general election in your constituency."

"Things have changed since then. That election was fought on the old lines, before the new electors had had time to understand their privileges and responsibilities, and the Tory candidate was a local man and a sort of popular

idol. The conditions now are certainly more hopeful."

"Miss Irvine gave me an amusing account of your first committee meeting last week—— Oh, I forgot you were not aware I knew your sister. It was only about a month ago that I discovered her to be your sister."

"You know Margaret?" Wentworth said slowly, as if he were not quite sure whether to feel pleased or displeased by the announcement. "Have you been acquainted long?"

"We have known each other a year now. Your brother brought us together last summer, and I am glad to say we have met pretty frequently since then. Does it sound conceited to say we like each other?"

"No, I think it sounds no more than frank. I am glad you like my sister."

"She is filled with delight by the accounts of your hard work at Coln," Mrs. Arlingham remarked. "I think she rates the value of your labour, simply as labour, far above that of your ultimate possible success."

Wentworth turned his dark mournful eyes upon her. "Has Margaret been lamenting over my disinclination for serious occupation? My family seem to be always looking out anxiously for fresh proofs of my butterfly nature."

"I fancy she thinks you have had play enough for the present, and ought to come back to your tasks again," Muriel replied rather absently. She could not help wondering how it had happened that she had never previously noticed the excessive sadness of Wentworth's eyes; or was it only of late that, in curious contrast with the rest of his keen, expressive face, they had come to look so utterly tired, burnt out, and hopeless? If the latter hypothesis was the correct one, he had altered slightly after all—but in this one point only, as far as appearance went. Otherwise his outward man was but little changed, and he carried his forty-four years well and lightly.

"Play may be as much of a task as work," he said in answer to her last remark; "at least, if one plays hard. And I do generally play hard, unfortunately. I have a most unlucky talent for getting profoundly interested in trifles and waxing over-enthusiastic about my passing pursuits. It is a great misfortune to be so constituted—it makes one a trouble to one's self, and very often a nuisance to one's friends. But one cannot change one's nature."

"There is nothing so comfortable as a thorough-going fatalism," said Muriel, with an odd little

smile. "Natural temperament we are surely not responsible for, and temperament and environment together are supposed to have the making of most characters. Poor environment! it has become a heavily laden scapegoat nowadays."

"You have not attained to the views you think so comfortable, nevertheless?"

"Not yet. I have old-fashioned prejudices still. I think most people have—in some unacknowledged corner of their minds. Take yourself for example. Your practice contradicts your theory. Unless you had a pretty strong instinctive belief in the capability for change in human nature, you would hardly be toiling now with all your might to persuade some thousands of your fellow-men to run counter to everything that they have been taught to support—and have supported—for generations past."

"I ask them to change their opinions only, not their natures," Wentworth returned, "and I find even the lesser undertaking uncommonly hard work. Still, it is well to be at work on something," he added, with one of his old abrupt changes of manner, and with a spark of the old fire lighting his weary eyes. "What is life worth, if one is not doing some kind of work in it? My year of play bored me dreadfully, Mrs. Arlingham."

"Your holiday was an enforced one to begin with, I am told," Muriel said, feeling a little softened towards him. "Perhaps if you had been less unsparing of yourself in the past, so long a spell of subsequent idleness would not have been necessary. I hope it has done all that was needed for you?" She put her final question in a tone of cold politeness merely.

"Thank you, I had all the rest I needed long ago; I hardly know why I did not come home sooner. But I am not altogether sorry that I was induced to linger. One picks up all sorts of useful information yonder."

"Your American experiences ought to prove very useful at the present juncture," Muriel rejoined. "You have been able to observe the actual working of all the different forms of government the constitution-mongers are so eager for us to imitate."

Wentworth looked half surprised, half amused. "It is pleasant to hear a lady talking of politics as if she both understood and cared for them," he observed. "I feel now that I am indeed back again in England. The American female mind, highly cultured as it is in other respects, is Gallio-like as regards politics. It cares for none of those things."

"Some of the American women I have met cared for them very much."

"Those were travelled Americans—the Europeanized specimens. And if you tax your memory, you will probably recollect that even their interest was confined to European—that is, to them, foreign—affairs. To their own politics they are usually profoundly indifferent. I suppose Lord Ellesthorpe takes good care to keep your interest in matters political alive?"

"Or Lady Ellesthorpe does. She is by far the most enthusiastic politician of the two," said Muriel. "But the flame does not require a great deal of fanning."

"It never did with you," said Wentworth impulsively. He wished the words unsaid as soon as spoken, but the perfectly unmoved composure of his companion's face reassured him. "I am a little surprised," he went on, "to find you so warm a supporter of the Liberal cause. I was inclined to fancy you belonged to the ranks of our formidable opponents, the Dames of the Primrose League."

"Wherefore, pray?"

"Because I imagined Mr. Arlingham to be a Tory, and supposed that your opinions would naturally follow the same line as his. Have you

and Lady Ellesthorpe between you succeeded in converting him to more advanced views?"

"There was no need of conversion in my husband's case. He inherited his Liberal opinions from his father, who was a Whig of the fine old school now extinct. What made you credit Mr. Arlingham with retrograde opinions?"

"I think a single remark which he made on the only occasion when I had the pleasure of meeting him—now some years ago. I misinterpreted it, no doubt. I beg Mr. Arlingham's pardon a thousand times"—glancing in the direction of the unconscious Jack, who was sitting near the other end of the table.

"It will be easily granted you," Muriel said. (Certainly no one would have suspected that she had just heard an astonishing piece of news.) "Mr. Arlingham does not take any very absorbing interest in party politics. But you showed an absence of the judicial qualities, in leaping to a conclusion on such slight evidence, which is really quite unpardonable in a lawyer. You might surely have cross-examined the witness first!"

"You are very severe, Mrs. Arlingham. But I freely acknowledge myself in the wrong—I won't try to deprecate your just condemnation."

“What I feel to be even more unpardonable,” Muriel continued, “is your giving me a place, on no evidence at all—except that of an undisciplined imagination—among the Dames of the Primrose League! I protest utterly and indignantly.”

“Do you object to their principles, or to their practice?”

“Primarily to their principles, since I claim to be a very good Liberal indeed. But a little to their practice also, in some respects. I do not think the figure of the female canvasser occupies a very noble place in the scheme of things, and I rather object to the part she plays under the League. It seems to me too much of a wheedling part altogether. If people cannot be argued into voting according to my ideas, I don’t want to wheedle them into doing it.”

“I am glad indeed to hear you say that!” said Wentworth, more eagerly than he had spoken yet. “But we must not throw too many stones at our opponents in this respect. I know Liberal ladies who can vie with any Ruling Councillor of them all—who think no arts too mean to be employed to win a vote for friend or relation, and who will stoop to flattery and falsehood quite unblushingly so long as the flattery

and the fibs are supposed to be gaining adherents for the 'cause.' A lady who walks by these principles—she is a very influential person in Westshire—wanted me to bring down my little daughter, not yet sixteen, to join her in angling for votes among the Coln operatives! Did you ever hear of anything so preposterous?"

"I am afraid the influential lady found her proposition less welcome than she expected."

"Perhaps I refused less courteously than I should have done. No doubt she meant well according to her lights. But I was a little carried out of myself at the bare idea of my little Stella—a mere child, though a very dear one—soiling her white wings in the mud of a contested election. My children are young, even for their age—a fact very pleasant to me, and which I owe to my sister's wise guardianship of them in my absence."

"They seemed charmingly simple and unaffected, I thought," said Muriel. "I have seen them, you know, at your sister's house." The bishop turning just then to help himself to an *entrée*, she profited by the opportunity to draw him into the conversation; but whether she did it adroitly and of set purpose or no, Wentworth could not decide in his own mind. Mrs. Arling-

ham fairly surprised and puzzled him at every turn.

She surprised him still more later in the evening, when he could watch her holding her miniature court, a radiant though somewhat stately princess. He was busy receiving something of an ovation on his own account, but he found leisure to observe Mrs. Arlingham from time to time, and even to speculate in a passing way on the possible causes which had wrought so marvellous a change. Was she happy, he wondered? She looked happy enough, but appearances are proverbially deceitful, and Geoffrey Arlingham did not strike him as quite the man to satisfy the ideas of a woman like Muriel Ferrars.

The evening was well advanced when he happened to come again across his hostess, of whom Mr. and Mrs. Arlingham had just taken leave. "Well, what did you think of my star?" she inquired. "Don't be perverse, and say you don't admire her, or I shall think you are aiming at singularity, and you know that is an unfailing sign of a small mind."

"My mind is large enough, at any rate, to admit freely that Mrs. Arlingham is beautiful," Wentworth replied. "She is very much im-

proved since I saw her last. But, to be sure, she was hardly more than a child at that time."

"So you knew her already?"

"Not as Mrs. Arlingham. As Miss Ferrars I knew her a little."

"Her people live in Holmshire, I have heard. Did you 'know her at home,' as my Eton boy puts it?" asked Lady Beatrice, who liked to know all about her friends' private histories.

"Oh dear, no!" answered Wentworth, who was not fond of being catechized. "I don't know her people at all. I met her once travelling in Switzerland; it was a mere chance acquaintance."





CHAPTER XIV.

AT A LITTLE DINNER-PARTY.

"My heart's a coward, though my words are brave."

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

THE polling day at Coln, one of the half-dozen new Parliamentary boroughs created by the last Reform Act in the thickly populated manufacturing county of Westshire, passed off rather more quietly than had been anticipated from the excited state of popular feeling in the constituency. Agents and committee-men on both sides had, of course, all along protested their confidence in the final issue—protested it in tones more than commonly stentorian and unhesitating, for the very reason that they were really just as much in the dark as to the probable result of the contest as the most ignorant weaver who set his mark upon the official voting paper. But loudly as these

provincial politicians of either complexion might bluster, the Tories relying on the unblemished record of Westshire as a stronghold of the Conservative faith, and the Liberals waxing strong in courage as they recalled the brilliant series of addresses in which their candidate had demolished his opponent's fallacies and built up, bit by bit, the stately edifice of Liberal doctrine, there were few of them to whom the moment when the result of the poll was read out from the steps of the Town Hall was not one of rather trying suspense. "Wentworth, 3561; Tenant, 3532." The numbers showed with sufficient clearness the closeness of the struggle, and the zeal with which it had been fought out.

So Paul Wentworth returned to town a duly elected member of the House of Commons, and "took the oath and his seat for Coln." Took his seat silently for a while, being in no hurry to thrust himself prematurely on one of the most critical audiences in the world, and preferring to bide his time and take his observations quietly. He had plenty to say, and was quite determined to say it, but his ambition was patient as well as daring, and he knew that without coolness and judgment even his gifts of eloquence would avail him little at St. Stephen's. And

although he was impulsive as well as ambitious, yet when he chose, he well understood—no man in England perhaps better—how to make his impulses wait upon his will.

Meanwhile he went, as in former days, a good deal into society, and found himself popular as ever. At first he seemed indolent about resuming his old part of social idol—perhaps his untrammelled life in America had inspired him with a craving for personal freedom and created a dislike to the flowery chains with which, like the devout Buddhist, Society insists on wreathing the limbs of her deities. But after a while ancient habit proved too strong for this new craving, or else the perfume of the proffered incense was a little intoxicating to his senses, for he soon threw himself again into his *rôle*, and that with apparent pleasure. The incense might possibly be composed of despicable ingredients, but there was no denying that it still smelt sweet.

One person alone there was of Mr. Wentworth's acquaintance who never gratified his vanity in the smallest particular, or flattered his love of power by permitting him to exercise the smallest ascendancy over her or her opinions. This person was Muriel Arlingham, whom he met,

nevertheless, pretty frequently from time to time. They happened to move very much in the same set, a set which had a strong political leaven in it, and over which Lady Ellesthorpe and Lady Beatrice Orme in some sort presided. As the season wore on they saw a good deal of one another, and even became friendly after a surface fashion. There seemed no reason why they should not be friendly. No uncomfortable recollections appeared to weigh on the memory of either, and Wentworth was careful to restrict his conversation to topics of general interest only. Perhaps he considered that he owed Muriel this much in return for her magnanimity in consenting to overlook the past.

On these general topics he found plenty to say to her, for she was a clever woman now, as well as a beautiful one. He had always thought her a particularly intelligent girl, and he was glad to find that, though she had added knowledge of the world to her acquirements during the last four years, she still retained unspoilt much of her freshness and piquancy of thought. She was very agreeable to talk to, and as she had evidently had the good sense to forget all the folly of a certain three weeks on the Lake of Lucerne—"Fool!" Wentworth added in a mental aside,

apostrophizing himself, "thrice fool to imagine she would have a longer memory than other women!"—he felt quite at liberty to talk to her whenever chance threw them in each other's way. But she had lost her ideal charm for him, or was in a fair way of losing it, altogether. Wentworth liked a woman to be above all things soft, yielding, and sympathetic, and Muriel was no longer any of the three. There was a hard brilliancy about her which provoked and almost repelled him at times—"about as responsive as a bit of bright enamel," he would say to himself angrily. Yet the following evening generally found him ready to talk to her again, if they chanced to encounter one another.

Muriel, on her side, looking out upon the world with the weariness born of intense disappointment, found a new amusement in the mingled brilliancy and bitterness of Wentworth's light, discursive talk, and enjoyed it with a keener relish than she was fully aware of; but rather as she might have enjoyed the conversation of a new and gifted acquaintance, for in the Wentworth whom she met nightly in London drawing-rooms she scarcely recognized the mental lineaments of the man she had formerly known. The side of his character now

chiefly turned to her was one of which she had hitherto barely surmised the existence—there had not been much opportunity for displaying cynical knowledge of the world at the Hôtel Mythen. Now, if there were still any latent softness about him, he certainly concealed it wonderfully well—so well that Muriel caught herself marvelling what had become of all the more winning qualities she had once thought so lovable? Had they ceased to exist altogether? Apparently; and with them the strange fascination that Mr. Wentworth had undoubtedly possessed for her in bygone days. She did not deny that he was still attractive after a sort. A shrewd, clever, ambitious man of the world, with a caustic wit, and a graceful address, and remarkable conversational powers, can generally manage to make himself attractive if he pleases. But it needs a good deal more than this to make him lovable.

Mrs. Arlingham very soon made up her mind on the subject of the member for Coln; but he still inclined to suspend judgment on her for a while, although it was difficult for him to justify this suspension of judgment to himself. As Muriel had appeared to Wentworth on the night of her reintroduction to him at Lady Beatrice

Orme's, so she continued to appear to him. Nothing occurred to confirm a vague suspicion of his that what he saw was not the genuine Muriel, but only a clever counterfeit, and yet the suspicion haunted him with unreasonable persistence. Naturally, he felt not a little tempted to investigate the question a little further in consequence. If an interesting problem to which you believe yourself (rightly or wrongly) to hold the key is laid before you, it is hardly in human nature to refrain from attempting its solution, especially if you happen to be unusually skilful in solving problems of that particular kind.

The end of June came, however, and Wentworth had not yet succeeded in unriddling the enigma that perplexed him. Certainly he had plenty of other and more important things to do, for it was a stirring time in the House, and a series of late sittings left him less leisure than usual to give to social claims and amusements. Mrs. Arlingham was busy too, in her own way—"hard at work killing time," she had said to Margaret Irvine, with a faint laugh that chilled Margaret's heart. She was at a loss to explain a strange hardness which seemed to be creeping over her friend, and mourned silently that no

sweeter and homelier cares than such as are entailed by an endless round of party-going and party-giving should have fallen to Muriel's lot. For although Jack was more than ever convinced that he had thrown himself away by his disinterested and imprudent match, he fully appreciated his wife's qualities as a hostess, and encouraged her to frequent entertainments.

On the last day of June Muriel had arranged to give a little dinner—one such as she herself infinitely preferred to the bigger banquets in which her husband's soul delighted—a party of twelve only. It was not a duty dinner, but had been planned by her merely for amusement, so she felt she had a right to indulge her own taste in the selection of the guests for the occasion, and was fortunate in securing the presence of those whose presence she specially desired. The success of the party was a foregone conclusion, when a note which reached her on the morning of the important day itself threatened to disturb all her arrangements.

“How provoking!” she exclaimed, after reading the unwelcome missive through. “With so little time left to do anything in!”

“What is provoking?” inquired her husband, looking up from *his* letters, through which he

was glancing in a rough-and-ready fashion before starting for an early ride.

"Lady Beatrice writes to tell me that Mr. Orme can't possibly come to us to-night. The date of the banquet to Lord Lyster has been altered at the last moment, and it is to come off this evening. 'Of course you will understand,' etc., etc. Of course I do understand, but it is an annoying *contretemps*. Jack, you must really find some one to take Mr. Orme's place. It is too late to begin writing notes."

"What a hideous nuisance!" Jack responded. "This comes of little parties made up in pairs. It is always safer to have an extra man or two. Well, who am I to ask?"

"It must depend on whom you meet and find disengaged, of course," replied his wife. "Shall you see any likely people this morning, do you think?"

"I shall see Fitzmaurice, but he is sure to be going to the Lyster affair. There's Alister Newton, if you care to have him."

"Certainly not," said Muriel, flushing. "I sometimes wonder how you can bear——" She checked herself with a great effort. "He would not fit in at all to-night," she continued less vehemently. "You must look out for some one

likely to hit it off with the others, and especially with Lady Beatrice and the Carltons."

"Well, I'll see what I can do," Jack said rather sulkily, drawing on his gloves. "I don't see, however, that it's any of my business. The party's your party, you know." And with this ungracious promise Muriel was obliged perforce to content herself, though by no means satisfied that it would ever be fulfilled, since she had learnt by experience that Mr. Arlingham never put himself out of the way to oblige her, and it was not quite probable that a desirable guest would exactly cross his path by accident.

However, just as she reached her room to dress for dinner, her husband ran upstairs with a self-satisfied air. "I've got a man for you," he said, "the very man for the place. I met him on the steps of the Palladium, and was suddenly inspired to do the right thing and ask him."

"Clever boy!" said Muriel. "You have dissipated an awful cloud of gloomy anticipation which has been pressing on me all day. Who is it, Jack? I pant to know."

"Wentworth — Paul Wentworth. Just the man, isn't he? Or what's wrong now?" — with a sudden lapse into irritability.

"Nothing is wrong; Mr. Wentworth will do

admirably. I was only thinking it was rather an informal way of inviting him. You see, he is not a person to be treated cavalierly, and he has never dined here before."

"Hasn't he? Then I wonder you never asked him. He is a man everybody asks, and he is always civil when we meet. He has called here, I suppose."

"Yes, I have seen his card once or twice. And I have sent him an invitation for the seventh; I did not think I could leave him out of a large affair like that."

"I should think not," Jack replied decidedly. "Well, he did not give himself any airs when I asked him to dine; he seemed glad to come. Of course I said it was quite a small informal affair. But as you have never invited him here before, I think you are lucky to have got hold of him now."

"Very lucky," Muriel acquiesced rather lifelessly, turning away. — "Robson," she said abruptly to her maid, as she entered her room and closed the door, "I shall not wear that white gown to-night, after all. It is rather too girlish for a dinner dress. Put out my dark-blue velvet instead."

"Very well, ma'am. But won't you find the

velvet rather heavy to-night? It's a very sultry evening."

"No, I have quite decided upon it." And Robson refrained from further remonstrance, perceiving that, for some reason or other, her mistress was determined on the more severe and matronly costume—a fact which surprised the maid not a little, as it was only two days since that the gown in question had been condemned by Mrs. Arlingham herself as "very heavy and unbecoming."

Perhaps it was less unbecoming than she imagined, for some at least of her guests that night thought they had never seen her look lovelier. And when Wentworth arrived on the scene, he felt quite ready to endorse this opinion.

He was, apparently, in particularly high spirits, and the light in his eyes and the unwonted animation of his manner alike bore witness to some hidden cause of excitement. There were several men in the room far younger and handsomer than he, yet from the moment he entered it they all seemed to shrink into comparative insignificance and to look either heavy or trivial. Beside that worn, speaking face, with its stamp royal of commanding intellect indelibly

impressed on every feature, mere physical beauty lost much of its attraction and all its power.

The new feeling, whatever it was, which gave so much life to Wentworth's expression, imparted also more than ordinary fluency and brilliancy to his talk at dinner, where he sat on his hostess's left hand—Muriel having decided in her own mind that she could not venture to deny him what happened to be, on this occasion, his rightful position. His *vis-à-vis*, Lord Carlton, chanced to be an intimate personal friend of his own, and the lady allotted to him proving rather shy and silent, and plainly preferring listening to talking, the conversation at the head of the table gradually became a triangular one between Mrs. Arlingham and her two immediate neighbours.

Just before Muriel gave the mystic signal for adjournment on the ladies' part, she turned to Lord Carlton, saying, "I want you to pronounce judgment to-night on a new song and a new singer. At least, I have every hope that the singer will be new to you. I am not at all sure about his genius for composition, but I think there is not much room for doubt about his voice."

"Who is it?" inquired Lord Carlton. He

was a distinguished amateur, and his tall figure and fine frank face were as familiar to everybody in his stall at the Popular Concerts as in his place in the House of Lords.

“Mr. Hartley Egerton—one of the Egertons of Eastshire. He was intended for the Bar, and has been called, I believe, but I don’t think he has ever practised. He hates law, and his whole soul is absorbed in music. His darling ambition is to become a professional musician—to make his fortune as a composer. I should like you to see and hear him.”

“I shall be delighted to do both,” Lord Carlton responded cordially. “How old is the young man? He is young, I suppose?”

“About eight and twenty, I fancy: a very quiet, unaffected man, wholly wrapped up in his art. I wish he could have dined with us to-night, but he was engaged elsewhere until ten o’clock, unfortunately.”

“What do you think yourself of his compositions?”

“I hardly know,” Muriel replied doubtfully. “I am not capable of judging scientifically, you see. All I have heard is certainly interesting in its way, but I am not sure whether his ideas are really original, or only bizarre. One cannot

wish any young man to adopt the career of a professional singer, or I should think it was perhaps a pity that Mr. Egerton does not stake his fortune on his singing instead of his songs and sonatas. I heard him sing Schubert's 'Litanei' last night—I wish you had been there, Lord Carlton! One forgot all about this commonplace world, and found one's self lifted into quite a different one for the moment."

"It is good to feel so lifted up sometimes, even if it be only for a moment," said Lord Carlton gravely. He had a peculiarly grave, simple manner, specially pleasing in an elderly man of such dignified appearance.

"I don't know," Muriel answered, with a swift change of mood. "I hate the inevitable fall after the flight is over."

"So you care for music as much as ever?" It was Wentworth who spoke this time, in a tone which Muriel had never heard from his lips since the renewal of their acquaintance, and which she fancied his voice had quite unlearned.

She drew a long breath. "I care for it more than ever. Isn't it a thing that one only learns to love more and more as time goes on? Can you fancy any one who had ever cared for music ceasing to care?"

"No, I cannot," Wentworth answered. "I cannot understand such a change, at least. But people do change very curiously—sometimes to a degree which is almost terrible to witness."

Muriel caught Lady Beatrice Orme's eye at this moment, and rose from the table—a little too precipitately, and therefore less gracefully than usual. "'We change our opinions sometimes, our tastes never,'" she said in a random way, picking up her fan. "Who said that, I wonder? I like to be able to put an author's name to a quotation. Try and remember before you come upstairs, please."

When the men of the party did go upstairs, they found the embryo Beethoven already in possession. He was not singing, however; only sitting at the grand piano in the *chiaroscuro* of the half-lighted inner drawing-room, and playing in a soft dreamy fashion one of Chopin's nocturnes. Lady Carlton, quite as much of a musical enthusiast as her husband, was sitting on a low seat near the player, listening with keen interest; but the other lady guests had preferred hearing his strains from a distance, where the said strains did not altogether form a bar to low-voiced conversation, and had remained in the outer room. Most of the gentlemen, when

they came in, followed the example set them ; Lord Carlton and Wentworth, however, strolled on into the semi-darkness. The former joined his wife beside the piano, and the latter paused just inside the doorway, where, in the shadow of the heavy hangings which draped it, he descried Muriel's figure.

She was standing perfectly still, with her hands resting on a little ebony table covered with flowers, as if they had been arrested in sudden movement towards something. Her face was entirely in shadow, but a faint gleam of light from a shaded lamp on a bracket close by just revealed the outline of her profile, and the intense whiteness of her throat and arm against the dark folds of her velvet gown. She did not stir at Wentworth's approach—evidently she was unconscious of it. The music seemed to be holding her spellbound ; and watching her thus, unseen himself, Wentworth could almost have cheated himself into the belief that four years had been blotted out from his life's record, and that he was back again with the girl Muriel in the dark old *salon* of the little Swiss hotel.

It was Chopin's G minor nocturne which had fascinated her—saddest and sweetest of all the sad sweet lyrics chanted by that strange wild

singer of wonderful tone poems; and the plaintive, hopeless strain went on rising and falling, deepening and fading away, while at every pause Wentworth could catch the sound of Muriel's quickened breathing. The intermezzo followed—that profound chant which interrupts the grief and despair of the original subject like the voice of a distant organ, sounding notes of solemn resignation and bringing a faint hope of peace and forgiveness to the conscience-stricken, storm-tossed soul. But this interlude of calm does not last. The holier harmonies die away, and the old theme of sorrow and unrest recurs, sobbing itself at last into quiet for sheer weariness of pain.

The close of Mr. Egerton's performance was followed by the usual gentle buzz of thanks and admiration; then came a movement of relief and an outburst of talk in the outer room, and a little hum of eager conversation round the piano in the inner. And Muriel awoke from her abstraction—and saw Wentworth standing beside her.

Abandoning her former attitude, she moved a step or two, and as the movement brought her face into fuller light, Wentworth saw that tears hung on her eyelashes. As her eyes met his, she

said quite simply, "That nocturne is a great favourite of mine. It always makes me feel inclined to cry when I hear it. Of course that is foolish, but I really cannot help myself."

"Why foolish?" Wentworth answered. "There is no need to feel ashamed of being touched by the cry of a broken heart and a soul in despair."

"Does it sound like that to you?" she asked eagerly. "It does to me—I have always heard that cry in it ever since I knew it first. I remember thinking once that Chopin might have given it for a motto, 'He found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.'"

"Then there is one point on which we still think alike. I am glad to know that," Wentworth said. "Music weaves its old spell with you, I see," he added, after a moment's pause. "You have not yet quite outgrown your propensity for seeing visions."

"Very nearly, I hope," Muriel rejoined, suddenly resuming the light, indifferent tone of veiled mockery which always aggravated Wentworth so intensely. "It is quite a childish propensity, you know; indeed it may almost rank as a childish ailment. Sometimes people take it lightly, and sometimes severely, to carry on

the simile—I took it very severely indeed, and consequently I have been a long time getting over it.”

“It is fashionable to laugh at sentiment, I know,” Wentworth replied angrily, “and you are quite right to follow the fashion, no doubt. I try to sometimes myself, but I fear I do it very awkwardly. Just at the critical moment I generally forget the absurdity of the thing, and find myself in earnest, quite by mistake. You should guard yourself against falling into that error; it entails all kinds of painful consequences occasionally.”

Muriel’s only reply to this was a rather artificial little laugh. She turned back abruptly to the flower-table, and began lifting a large heavy bowl of tall exotics, which formed the centre of the floral arrangement.

“Let me help you,” Wentworth interposed. “Do you want this moved?”

“It is between Mr. Egerton and the doorway, as you see,” Muriel answered rather brusquely. “It must retire to the side table. But I can move it myself, thank you.”

Her hands were trembling perceptibly, perhaps with the weight of the bowl, and Wentworth took hold of it, disregarding her last words. “It

is too heavy for you. Give it to me," he said, just letting his glance fall full on her face for a moment.

She relinquished the flowers at once, and, with a mechanical "Thank you," moved away to the group by the piano, while Wentworth set down his burden carefully in the place she had indicated. And as he did so, he smiled very faintly to himself.

Then he went back and mingled with the rest, and Mr. Egerton began to sing. There was no more talking after that. The young man had one of those voices which appeal directly even to the most unmusical natures, and he held his audience silent in hushed enjoyment. He was shy about performing his own compositions, though he was ready enough to put them into Lord Carlton's hands for criticism, but any other song asked for he was prepared with, no matter what it might be—his repertory appeared unlimited. At last one of his listeners suggested that he had not yet given them any Rubinstein. "Just one specimen of Rubinstein, Mr. Egerton, if we are not trespassing too much on your good nature. Won't you give us 'Es blinkt der Thau'?—Mrs. Arlingham, please join your solicitations to mine!"

Muriel changed colour slightly. "It is a very beautiful song," she said. "I think Rubinstein is about at his best in it. Please sing it, Mr. Egerton, if you are not too tired."

Mr. Egerton was not the least in the world tired, but ventured to hint that it would be an agreeable change if Mrs. Arlingham were to sing a little herself. Did she not sing sometimes?

"Sometimes—with the door locked and the household away," Muriel answered laughingly. "I was never a 'performer,' to use the cant term, and of late years I have nearly given up singing altogether."

"One never sings or plays after one marries, I find," Lady Beatrice Orme remarked. "All my friends tell me that is their experience, and certainly I am an example of the truth of the axiom myself. Generally, you see, one's husband hates music, and that is excuse enough for throwing it aside."

"My husband is a shining exception to the general rule, then," said Muriel. "He is very fond of music. I do occasionally sing even now—to a select audience of one—as he seems to regret my giving up my one accomplishment."

"If I bring his influence to bear, shall I induce you to sing to us now?" Wentworth put in.

He meant his tone to be half jesting, but actually it was sharp to bitterness.

"I am afraid he would not consent to have his influence directed," Muriel answered. "He never asks impossibilities, either; he knows where the sphere of legitimate influence ends.—Mr. Egerton, may we not have the Rubinstein?"

The young man struck the first chords obediently, and Muriel by a gesture invited Lady Beatrice to a little sofa near at hand. The two together made a pleasing picture, Lady Beatrice's fair, piquant prettiness contrasting as admirably with the darker and more classic beauty of Muriel, as did her light draperies of silk and gauze with the severe lines of her companion's simpler and heavier attire. When the song was over, Wentworth came up to them.

"I heard Henschel sing that the other day," he remarked, "but even he has not spoilt me for Mr. Egerton. What a treasure you have unearthed for us, Mrs. Arlingham!"

"Surely you used to sing that song yourself once upon a time," said Lady Beatrice. "Have you renounced singing altogether?"

"Altogether—entirely," Wentworth answered, with rather more emphasis than the occasion demanded.

"You keep your voice for the country's service now, I suppose," observed Lady Beatrice, smiling. "By-the-by, I think it is very nearly time you began to instruct a listening country—we are all on the watch, I can assure you!"

Wentworth smiled also, but preserved a discreet silence as to his intentions.

"But I am very sorry you have give up singing," went on Lady Beatrice, finding him impenetrable to her hints respecting his political conduct. "I am sorry for many reasons which you may easily guess, and for one besides which is not likely to occur to you. You were the only singer whose German songs ever gave me real pleasure, because with every one else I am at a loss to catch the words."

"Mr. Egerton is very fairly distinct," Wentworth said.

"Not distinct enough for me. My knowledge of the German language is slender, I am ashamed to say; I never really got over the difficulties of the dative case; and if I lose a single conjunction or preposition, I am lost. Now as regards 'Es blinkt der Thau.' I have a hazy impression of there being something about dew and moonbeams at the beginning, and something else about a dream that is to last eternally at

the end, but that is all. If you instituted an inquiry, you would probably find that every one in the room is in like case. They have caught a few words, and jumped to what appears a plausible conclusion, but they don't really understand much better than I."

"I think Mrs. Arlingham understands," said Wentworth quietly.

"Are you so good a German scholar?" Lady Beatrice asked, turning to her hostess. How exceedingly pretty Mrs. Arlingham was looking! only a trifle pale, certainly.

"I?" Muriel answered in a startled way. "Well, yes—pretty good, perhaps. I was in Germany a good deal as a child."

"The best way of learning a language," Wentworth rejoined, his face darkening suddenly. "You can point out an error in the conclusion Lady Beatrice drew as to the moral of 'Es blinkt der Thau,' I am sure?"

Muriel looked up at him—a kind of terrified fascination drew her eyes to his face—but she did not attempt to answer his question. Lady Beatrice unconsciously filled up the pause.

"Mine was a mere guess," she said, laughing. "I heard 'Traum' and 'ewig,' and pieced them together as best I could. Had they nothing to do with each other, after all?"

"Nothing whatever," said Wentworth, with a strange flash of the eyes, the very reverse of pleasant or reassuring to encounter. "The dream was a foolish dream, and never intended to last, Heine says. I am not sure I don't agree with him. And now I am afraid I must say good night, Mrs. Arlington. You will, I am sure, excuse my seeming rudeness in leaving so early; I had a five-line whip for eleven o'clock."

"Certainly; good night," Muriel answered. To all outward appearance she was merely a little formal and absent in manner; but if any one had told her afterwards that she had trembled and cowered when Wentworth held out his hand, she could not have ventured to contradict the assertion.

He went, and she drew a long breath of relief, recovering herself to find Lady Beatrice asking, "Have you ever heard Mr. Wentworth sing, Mrs. Arlington? You knew him in former years, I think."

"Yes, I have heard him sing—once."

"I always admired his singing immensely. Were not you struck by it?"

"I only heard him once—it is difficult to judge correctly on one hearing. I remember he had a fine voice," said Muriel, carefully clasping

one of her bracelets, which had come unfastened, "but I think he said himself that he was rather out of practice just then."

Certainly this was not the verdict of an enthusiastic admirer. Yet if it could have reached the ears of Paul Wentworth, by this time fairly on his way to the House of Commons, he might perhaps have smiled again.





CHAPTER XV.

“ROSEMARY, FOR REMEMBRANCE.”

“What more than found the bystanders
He found within this speech of hers
I know not; some faint quivering
In the last words, some little thing
That checked the cold words’ even flow.”

WILLIAM MORRIS.

THE following night Wentworth made his maiden speech in the House of Commons.

New members of whom much is expected frequently disappoint their friends and their party on their first *début* at St. Stephen’s, even if later on they succeed in justifying the estimate previously formed of their powers. The conditions of speech in the popular assembly and the kind of eloquence there appreciated are so radically different from those that prevail and win applause elsewhere, that the most practised platform speakers and the most distinguished

advocates often find themselves curiously ill at ease when they first attempt to open their lips in its unfamiliar atmosphere. This is perhaps specially true of lawyers, touching whose utterances the House is apt to be peculiarly critical, and who find it difficult to unlearn all at once the rhetoric which has proved so convincing in the case of many an obstinate jury, and adopt the more unvarnished and businesslike style characteristic of the experienced Parliamentary debater. Occasionally, however, there occurs a striking exception to this rule of comparative initial failure, and Wentworth's maiden speech was one of these striking exceptions. The chorus of approval it met with was unanimous; there was scarcely a jarring note to mar it. His political friends were delighted; his political opponents were frank in generous admiration; the press gave him his full meed of recognition. Not only was his speech loudly extolled by the Liberal organs, but even the hostile newspapers spoke of it with respect, and the *Times* itself was forward to congratulate his party on "this brilliant addition to its debating power," and to predict for the gifted speaker a political career as distinguished as the forensic one he had abandoned. By his retirement from

practice Mr. Wentworth had indeed deprived the English Bar of one of its brightest ornaments, and English jurisprudence of its foremost representative in the council of nations, but it might be that he was yet destined to render to his country, in a new capacity, services greater and more signal than any he had rendered her hitherto.

As a matter of course, Wentworth was met wherever he went with an outburst of congratulation, which he accepted simply enough. He was gratified, and made no profound secret of the fact. Though he had always cherished a quiet and unostentatious confidence in his own oratorical powers, and would not have wished a single word of his speech withdrawn or softened down had it been met with a storm of obloquy instead of a shout of acclamation, yet it was undeniably pleasant to find the favourable judgment he had passed upon himself so universally ratified. He did not plume himself overmuch on his achievement, but he was honestly glad that men and women whose opinion he valued should consider it an achievement. Strange many-sided paradox as the man was, there was nothing about him stranger or more paradoxical than a certain intense simplicity of feeling which often broke in some

curiously unexpected way through his outer envelope of cynical shrewdness, and was to be reckoned among his most winning qualities. There was something absolutely pathetic about this characteristic at times. The sight of a man of Wentworth's years suddenly roused to keen delight by a passing tribute of liking and sympathy, or touched to the quick by a transient hurt that (one might have thought) would have fallen innocuous on any nature less impressionable than that of a sensitive boy in his teens, had a decided element of pathos in it for some minds.

Perhaps Muriel Arlingham was of the number of these, and that was what caused her references to Wentworth's triumph, when they happened to meet soon afterwards at a great gathering at the American Minister's, to be so extremely light and cold. She had had evidence, albeit only momentary evidence, that some remains of the Paul Wentworth she had once known still lay hidden behind the social mask of the member for Coln, and that even now the man was not entirely made up of ambition, cynicism, vanity, and arrogant contempt of his less-gifted fellow-creatures. The barbed words he had addressed to her at her own house had convinced her that

the volcano was not really extinct, but only slumbering deceptively. Unless she were very careful, she might be favoured with another glimpse of the fiery depths she had erroneously imagined to have become dead and cold, and she by no means craved any more such glimpses. The last had been a kind of revelation to her—that is, as regards Wentworth; she was not aware that it had thrown any reflex light upon herself—and she disliked sudden revelations, and indeed excitements of all kinds. Since that day she had felt that it would be necessary to keep more than ever on the surface of things with Wentworth, and she guessed intuitively that to show any but the most languid interest in him at what was in some sort the crowning moment of his life, would be to provoke a great deal of that excitement which she did not want to witness. So she said as little as she considered consonant with bare civility, and discovered that even thus she had said too much. Perhaps Wentworth had not expected her to say anything at all, for he seemed gratified—unduly gratified, Muriel thought to herself, wondering why she had been guilty, after her late experience, of the folly of alluding, however lightly, to anything that concerned him personally.

She changed the subject as quickly as possible and when on such a theme it was easy to pass from the particular to the general. Yet although for the rest of the evening she talked with even more of sarcasm and levity than she was wont to introduce into her conversation with Wentworth, her persistent adoption of this tone did not succeed—as it had sometimes on previous occasions succeeded—in causing him to retire from her side half offended, and wholly out of humour with her and with himself alike. On the contrary, he continued to hover about her until she quitted the scene; and, though he was content to follow her lead in his choice of topics of conversation, he discussed them each and all with unnatural eagerness, wearing the while a look of intense earnestness which Muriel had often seen him wear in earlier days, but which rarely, if ever, showed itself to her now.

Perhaps it was this look of Wentworth's, as he leant against the embrasure of the window near which Muriel sat, and gazed down fixedly at her half-averted profile till the mere fascination of his steady gaze drew her unwilling eyes, once and again, from the contemplation of the gardenias and tuberose in her bouquet to the dark earnest face above her, which caused one of

two men passing by to remark *sotto voce* to his companion as soon as they were fairly out of earshot, "Wentworth is up to his old games again, I see! The heroine of this new novelette is very pretty, at any rate."

"I think you are mistaken," said his companion, with considerable stiffness. "In your conclusions, I mean. I can only just claim the lady's acquaintance, but she certainly strikes me as a woman to be respected as well as admired."

"Don't know her. Who is she?"

"Mrs. Geoffrey Arlingham, a distant connection of Lady Ellesthorpe's. She made her first appearance in society last year, when you were in India—her husband came into a heap of money quite unexpectedly, from a relation who died somewhere in America, I believe. People who know her well say that she is remarkably clever. If that is the case, I wonder how she came to ally herself with such a thick-headed ass as Arlingham—who, by the way, does not appear to particularly appreciate the prize he has won."

"So I should conclude," observed the other drily; "otherwise he would probably look after her a little better. Wentworth's flirtations are apt to be serious affairs."

"Wentworth is an older and wiser man than

he was some years ago, I fancy. Every one notices how greatly he has sobered down—and as regards Mrs. Arlingham, I believe there is nothing more serious in question than a friendship.”

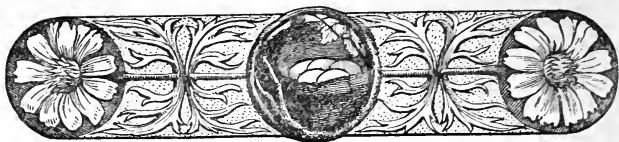
“Do you think he looked exactly friendly just now? Or shall we go a step further, and say he looked fatherly too? My dear fellow, Wentworth is past praying for where his vanity is concerned. He could never be any woman’s friend—not if he lived to complete his threescore years and ten. He can be a woman’s acquaintance—her courteous, indifferent acquaintance—or, if she pleases, her lover; but he knows no mean between the two. And your friend Mrs. Arlingham will probably find——” The speaker checked himself hastily, perceiving himself to be in dangerous proximity to Lady Ellesthorpe, who happened to be sitting on the other side of a screen near which he and his companion had paused for a moment. But his self-recollectedness came just too late. Lady Ellesthorpe had overheard his last mocking speech, and it continued to haunt her painfully long after she had returned home, and had had leisure to ponder its signification.

For Lady Ellesthorpe had received a severe

moral shock. To a woman of her nature it was exquisite pain even to guess that Muriel, now almost as dear to her as a daughter, was made a theme of comment among men, whether of the better or the baser sort. That her name should be for a moment, even in jest, coupled with that of any man not her husband, filled Lady Elles-thorpe with grief and indignation, but that it should be coupled with that of Paul Wentworth filled her with dismay. She blamed herself severely, albeit most unjustly, for having neglected to guard against this peril to Muriel's peace. The child, she felt, was virtually under her care—for she rated Geoffrey Arlingham's guardianship at its true value—and she must have been culpably careless to have allowed matters to come to the present pass. Her confidence in Muriel was unbounded: she did not believe that all the arts of a Macchiavelli would avail to loosen the young wife's firm hold on the principles of faith and duty, or to confuse her clear-sighted recognition of the eternal difference between moral right and wrong. But she knew that there are dreams and hallucinations from which a woman may awaken, with her moral grasp unshaken and her moral standard as lofty as ever, but with her life's happiness in ruins at

her feet, nevertheless. Was this to be Muriel's fate? "God forbid!" Lady Ellesthorpe said earnestly within herself, mentally resolving that no present pain, whether to herself or to Muriel, should weigh with her in her efforts to avert so terrible a catastrophe as that.





CHAPTER XVI.,

LADY ELLESTHORPE SPEAKS.

“Nay, the world, the world,
All ear and eye, with such a stupid heart
To interpret ear and eye, and such a tongue
To blare its own interpretation.”

TENNYSON.

“I WAS not sure whether you knew it or not,” Lady Ellesthorpe said slowly and regretfully, “and I wanted to keep it from you as long as I possibly could. But lately I have fancied that you guessed something of the truth.”

“Yes,” Muriel answered in a mechanical, emotionless way. She sat, looking calm even to coldness, opposite her motherly friend, whose grieved voice and moistened eyes showed plainly how deep was *her* emotion. “Yes, from one or two things that happened lately I thought it must be—as you say.”

“When I came here to-day,” Lady Ellesthorpe

continued, "I was still undecided as to whether I would speak or not, and if it had not been for what Ellesthorpe told me last night, I would certainly never have spoken. But I reminded myself that, as his wife, you could do more for him than any one else, and yet, while you remained in ignorance, you could not help him at all. Supposing I did not tell you, and then you should reproach me hereafter for having denied you the chance of saving him!" Lady Ellesthorpe's eyes filled with tears, and her voice faltered. "If you knew already, my speaking can have made but little difference."

"It is only a sort of confirmation," Muriel replied with an effort. "The truth came to me, I scarcely know how, months ago. Perhaps seeing that he was worried and uneasy, and knowing that those men were always with him, made me guess at first how it must be. I tried to do what seemed best, without asking questions. That I could not have done. But of course he has not told me." She spoke in little broken phrases, as if she had not strength for more.

"Those men!" Lady Ellesthorpe repeated eagerly, passing over the pathetic indication of disunion contained in the young wife's last

words simply because it revealed a grief utterly beyond her power to reach or comfort. "It is Graham and his set who have led Geoffrey astray. Every young man newly endowed with wealth and unpractised in fashionable follies is fair game to such as they are. They are not swindlers or cheats, of course; no doubt they plume themselves on being gentlemen and men of honour, but I doubt not they manage to make their friendship with Geoffrey conduce mightily to their own advantage. I don't pretend to understand the mysteries of the turf, and Ellesthorpe knows little more of such matters than I—still, people who do understand them say that Geoffrey is 'heavily dipped,' as they call it, in that quarter. But my husband does hear the club gossip, unfortunately; and oh, my dear, I should not dare tell you what Geoffrey is said to have lost to Alister Newton at *écarté*, two evenings running last week! Child, you must try and save him before it is too late."

"Or save the remainder of our fortune," Muriel answered, attempting to smile. "That is what it really comes to, after all, isn't it?"

"You know I did not mean that," Lady Ellesthorpe replied, as severely as it was possible

for her to speak. "Don't be flippant, Muriel. Humanly speaking, your husband's welfare depends on you, perhaps. Cannot you——"

"No, I cannot," Muriel interrupted very sadly. "I shall try; oh, be assured that I shall try! Dear Lady Ellesthorpe, do you imagine that I am so careless as not to have tried already, or do you suppose I will not try again with all my strength? Only I hope and trust that Jack's welfare may depend on something different, on some one better—for I can do so little! Poor Jack! poor Jack!"

She broke off hastily, as if ashamed of her passing outburst of emotion; then rose, crossed over to the window, and altered the position of the blinds. Finally, instead of coming back to her seat, she slipped behind her friend's chair and kissed her. "Thank you for your goodness, dear," she said softly. "I think you know what I want to say, and can't say. I never was good at expressing what I felt, and now it seems as if I had lost the faculty altogether. And I can't talk of—of *this*, even to you."

Lady Ellesthorpe's sole reply was, "My dear child!" followed by a close embrace. And then, by tacit mutual consent, the two women talked of other things.

After luncheon was over, however, and while Lady Ellesthorpe was putting on her bonnet in Muriel's room, the latter said, "I forgot to tell you we are leaving town on Monday instead of Monday week. That may be a good thing—since it is as you tell me."

"It seems strange that I should wish you gone," said Lady Ellesthorpe, with a sorrowful smile, "but I believe it might be best, just now. Is it your doing?"

"Partly, perhaps. The St. Henrys asked us to join their yachting party to Norway, and as Jack had a fancy that way, I urged it as much as I could. I wanted to have seen Lucy before I went, very much; she has not been at all well lately—but I must be content to give that up. We shall be rather hurried, of course; I shall not have time to take leave of half my acquaintances."

"Talking of acquaintances, I met an acquaintance—or rather a friend, and a very old one—of yours on my way here to-day."

"Who was that?"

"Sir John Clavering. By the way, how much more pleasant and genial he has become of late. I told him I was going to visit you, and he responded in his queer gruff voice, 'Then

you will spend your morning with the most charming young woman I know.' There's a pretty compliment for you!"

Muriel laughed softly. "I must recollect that," she said. "I haven't so many admirers that I can afford to think lightly of Sir John's compliment. I fancy I have been going a little out of fashion altogether lately; don't you think so?"

"I see no appreciable difference," answered Lady Ellesthorpe, turning to the glass, and deliberately untying her bonnet-strings to re-tie them immediately with elaborate care. "You have gained one new admirer that I would almost prefer your being without. Child, you may think of me as an interfering, ridiculous old woman, if you like, but I am speaking to you as I should speak to Amy or Nora, my own dear girls—don't let Paul Wentworth pay you much attention, my darling."

"Lady Ellesthorpe!" Muriel was standing in the middle of the room, very pale and erect, and her eyes were full of indignant light. But she added very calmly, after her first irrepressible exclamation of angry surprise, "My dear kind friend, I am not—I could not be offended with you. But you are utterly mistaken. I have no reason to consider Mr. Wentworth in any way

an admirer of mine, nor is he in the habit of paying me any particular attention. We are good friends when we happen to meet; nothing more."

"Dear child, I never supposed for a moment that you concerned yourself about his admiration, but it is a fact patent to other people's eyes. And it is an admiration that it is better to be without, Muriel; it never benefited any woman yet. The mere circumstance of being supposed to have attracted it is a circumstance to be regretted."

"I have seen but little of Mr. Wentworth, comparatively speaking," Muriel answered very quietly, though nothing but the deep, grateful affection she felt for her husband's cousin could have prevailed to keep back a very different reply from her lips. "He is a pleasant man socially, and—as I said before—we are good friends when we meet, as we do from time to time."

"‘Good friends,’" Lady Ellesthorpe repeated. "Well, that phrase, conventionally used, generally means courteous acquaintances—and courteous acquaintanceship is, I think, the only safe ground for any woman to venture on with Mr. Wentworth. There are many men, thank

God, whom a woman, however young and beautiful, may safely call her friends, but he is not one of those men. Even supposing that he should at any time prove himself capable of a friendship, the world would give it another name."

"Well," said Muriel, putting a desperate constraint upon herself, and smiling faintly, "Mr. Wentworth has never troubled himself to ask for my friendship, so I have not had the chance of refusing it to him. But, indeed, our acquaintance would not warrant his doing anything of the kind; it is a mere surface society affair. As to his character, I know people are very severe upon him; though, with beautiful inconsistency, they quarrel as to who shall have him at their parties in the same breath."

"I don't wish to be severe upon him at all," Lady Ellesthorpe rejoined, very glad to slide into generalities about Wentworth's character. "Some excuse I am inclined to believe he has had; something must have gone very wrong with him in his married life, or a man with so many fine qualities could never have gone so hopelessly crooked. For there is a great deal of good about him, incontestably, and it is just that which makes him so dangerously attractive. And for the time being, whatever his aim or

interest, he is frightfully sincere, and seems to mean all he says, thoroughly. I have known him ever since he was little more than a lad, and I often find it difficult to be sufficiently hard on him. I assure you, Muriel, that though it is against my better judgment—and my better principles too—yet I never spend half an hour in Paul Wentworth's company without feeling an intense admiration, and almost a reluctant fondness, for him !”

“For shame !” Muriel answered lightly. “How can you venture to confess to such reprehensible weakness when you have just had the temerity to give me a duenna-like lecture on matronly deportment ? Dear Lady Ellesthorpe, I wondered at your courage in attempting the lecture, but having performed that notable feat, who but you would have been frank enough to add the confession immediately afterwards ?” And it was amidst laughter, after all, that Lady Ellesthorpe's visit came to an end.

But although Muriel laughed at her friend's misgivings, she nevertheless, as far as lay in her power, steadily avoided Wentworth during the next few days, and when at last compelled to encounter him, met him with an invincible coldness and indifference which puzzled and piqued

and wounded him all at once. However, finally it had the desired effect of ridding her of his presence. There is small pleasure in attempting to talk to a woman who persistently answers you in brief uninterested monosyllables, and who suffers her attention to be distracted by every passing trifle in the midst of your most spirited narratives or your most brilliant flashes of wit.

Muriel really had cause enough for absence of mind without simulating it. A renewed attempt to gain her husband's confidence had only succeeded in widening the breach between them, converting Jack's callous indifference into active resentment and something very like impatient dislike ; and it was not, moreover, easy for her to forget the words with which he had flung back her earnest entreaties and gentle arguments in her face. And though he utterly refused to make known the state of his affairs to her, and contemptuously rejected her timid proposal to make some retrenchment in their growing expenditure, she gathered instinctively that things with him were only going from bad to worse. Day by day he grew more uncertain and unaccountable in his moods, and Muriel watched his outbursts of reckless high spirits and his fits of inexplicable depression with almost equal

anxiety. The St. Henrys put off their yachting party for three weeks, to the further complication of her anxieties, so that they were bound to linger on in town till the fourth week in July ; and Jack's intimacy with the so-called friends who were ruining him grew closer every week. Where was it all to end ? Muriel asked herself sadly, fifty times a day.





CHAPTER XVII.

THEN AND NOW.

“Ham.

I did love you once.

Oph. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.”

SHAKESPEARE.

THE last evening of Muriel's second season in town had at length come, and she was going to spend it at the house of Lady Beatrice Orme. As she drove thither with her husband, she asked herself whether she were glad or sorry that the mad revel was about to stop for a time, and found it very hard to answer her own question. On board the St. Henrys' yacht, or sitting quietly at Eversleigh while Jack wrought his annual havoc among the partridges, there would be so much time for thought, and thought was unspeakably painful to her nowadays. On the other hand, she was growing weary of the incessant round of make-believe enjoyment, and of the necessity for watchfulness, even in her

most innocent actions, which pressed itself upon her with redoubled weight since Lady Elles-thorpe's loving admonition had been uttered. Perhaps too—although this was but a faint hope—Jack might be more easily influenced in his old home, away from Alister Newton and his other new associates. "Only probably Alister Newton will be there too," Muriel concluded with a sigh. And then the halting of the carriage put a truce to her meditations.

Lady Beatrice Orme was not, on this particular occasion, holding one of her great receptions. She had called her party a "small and early" one; nevertheless, she had thrown open the whole of her fine suite of reception-rooms, and invited guests enough to ensure their looking tolerably full. There was singing going on in one of the rooms, but Muriel was not in the mood for music. She sat down in the great Louis Quinze drawing-room, where only a handful of people were sitting or standing about, the warblings of the favourite *prima donna* of the hour having attracted the greater number, and Mr. Cunningham, a young Radical member of Parliament, eagerly appropriated the chair by her side.

"I looked in at the Reform on my way here,"

the young man said, when he had sufficiently lamented Mrs. Arlingham's approaching departure, and discussed his own plans for the autumn. "They are in an awful way about this unlucky division."

"What division?" Muriel asked.

"Haven't you heard the news yet? Why, Government were beaten at nine o'clock on the Sualiland question—a majority of thirteen. It is only a side issue, of course, but it will shake their credit at a rather critical moment. The chiefs are furious, I hear; all the more so that the defeat was thoroughly unexpected. You see, so many of their own men voted against them."

"Against them, and with their consciences, perhaps," Muriel answered warmly. "It always puzzled me to understand how any really high-principled man could uphold the Government action in Sualiland; and now it seems that for once principle has triumphed over party spirit. You don't mean to say that you voted for that shameful convention?"—turning her fair indignant face suddenly full upon him.

"No," said Cunningham reluctantly. "But I did not vote against it, either. It did not seem quite fair to embarrass Ministers at such a

moment. So I left the House before the division was called."

Muriel sat silent, but her silence was quite as eloquent as any spoken condemnation could have been, and quite as unendurable to Mr. Cunningham.

"I am afraid you think very poorly of my action, Mrs. Arlingham," he began in an eager tone of self-exculpation, "but I assure you that, as it is, I am regarded as a semi-traitor to the cause. I have had various dark looks and cutting speeches hurled at my devoted head already to-night, in consequence of my absence from the division. As to Wentworth, Morison and his following would annihilate him if they could."

"What is Mr. Wentworth's offence?"

"He got up unexpectedly, and made a most brilliant speech—quite the best thing he has done in the House yet—dead against Ministers. It was like the springing of a mine. Till then they had thought themselves pretty safe, though there had been the usual protests from the other side, and from a few free-lances on our own. But Wentworth completely turned the tables upon them. You know his gift of irony—well, it had full play to-night. I could not

help enjoying the thought of what Morison's sufferings must have been while Wentworth was commending his pet scheme as 'a noble application of Liberal principles to the treatment of subject races'! Before Wentworth sat down, its fate was sealed. All the Independent Liberals voted with him, and about twenty of the rank and file. You may imagine how they were blessing him at the Reform, and declaiming on the unfitness of such a firebrand for office of any kind. He has thrown away any chances of that sort he may have had, for the present at least. Last week he was pretty sure of something before very long, and now—— "

"What of that?" Muriel interrupted with a flash of enthusiasm. "Right is right."

"Mrs. Arlingham, if one began to indulge scruples on matters of detail in things political, one would soon find it impossible to act with any party at all. This action of Wentworth's has not only injured himself, but—— Ah, here he is!" And Wentworth did in fact make his appearance at that moment, and came up to greet Mrs. Arlingham.

"Was Cunningham giving you an account of my crimes?" he asked presently, when the young man, feeling himself vaguely *de trop* and

ill at ease, had reluctantly withdrawn and joined a group of men a little way off. "I suppose you, too, are highly indignant with me for embarrassing your friends, and are fully persuaded that I did it out of sheer freakishness. Strange that no one can be brought to credit me with a conscience!"

"Consciences seem out of fashion nowadays," Muriel answered; "politically, at any rate. It is a good thing to be reminded sometimes that they do exist still, and have to be reckoned with occasionally."

She spoke quite coldly, almost cynically, yet her words brought a passing quiver to Wentworth's lips. He glanced down at her, leaning over the chair Mr. Cunningham had just quitted.

"Do you mean," he asked eagerly, "that you approve what I did—that you think I was right in doing it? If so, you are singular in your opinion."

Something in his tone touched her very strongly. For the first time, in answer to the question which was half an appeal, she looked up at him, and he saw the fire that still lingered in her beautiful eyes. "Indeed I think you were right," she answered. "Why need you care what professional politicians say of you, or what

the world thinks? There were at least men enough, like-minded, to follow where you led them."

She had spoken on the impulse of the moment: spoken in sympathy with all that was best, in forgetfulness of all that was worst in him—spoken once more with all the eager warmth of her girlish years. For an instant he did not answer, but before he uttered a syllable, she knew what she had done. The light in his face as he bent a little, a very little nearer to her before answering, was more eloquent than any words could have been. "Thank you," he said breathlessly at last; and then there was silence again for a minute.

And in that minute of silence, while his look still held hers fast, Wentworth learnt all that he desired to know. One unguarded moment, one impetuous sentence, had undone the work of long years of struggle, of self-discipline, of self-deception that had striven nobly to convert itself into calm reality, and, however unwillingly, her eyes could no longer refuse to make voiceless confession of the miserable truth. It was said, and could never be unsaid again.

It had all passed in a minute. Perhaps Wentworth, strong in his triumph, could afford to

show her a little mercy, or perhaps the shock of this sudden solution of the enigma that had puzzled him so long was almost too much for his own strength, for he drew back a little, with what sounded like a long-drawn sigh. Then Muriel rose from her chair.

“Will you take me into the music-room?” she asked. “Madame Torni is beginning the Shadow Song, and I think I should like to hear it. It suits her voice so perfectly.”

They found the music-room full to suffocation. Every seat there had been appropriated long before; movement was almost impossible, and even the very doorways were filled with a listening crowd. Wentworth managed to secure for his companion a little unoccupied space of blank wall—it was the best he could do for her. Then he took up his station by her side, and watched her as she listened, or seemed to listen, to Madame Torni’s marvellous *roulades* and *fioriture*. She was as colourless as her white gown—a simple, rather girlish dress of soft falling lace—or the pearls twisted about her throat, and she looked intensely weary too, leaning back against the dull red wall, and shading her face a little from the light with the flowers she carried. Yet in Wentworth’s

eyes she had never appeared quite so beautiful before.

The Shadow Song came to an end amidst a burst of applause, followed immediately by a hum of renewed conversations, and by a rain of questions, comments, criticisms, and light laughter. Muriel alone said nothing till Wentworth turned and spoke to her.

"You feel it terribly hot in this room, don't you?" he asked with a kind of grave solicitude.

"It is very hot, I think—yes."

"And you will be tired to death standing here besides," he went on, his voice softening more and more. "You are as white as this"—touching one of the lilies in her hand.

"I have a little headache," she replied. "From the heat, no doubt—it is nothing of any consequence."

"It is of consequence," he began; then, checking himself slightly, "At any rate, it shows that you ought not to be standing, and there is no chance of a seat here. Let me take you into the next room. You will still be able to hear."

"Oh no—no, thank you," she interrupted nervously. "I much prefer staying where I am. I can hear the music so much better—and then

I want to speak to Mrs. Musgrave, if I can. I wish I could catch her eye during the interval!"

Fate, in the person of Lady Beatrice Orme herself, a dainty little figure, exquisitely attired, made her way through the crowd and halted before Muriel at this juncture.

"My dear Mrs. Arlingham, I am sure you are getting crushed to death in that corner! This room is far too small for the number of people in it; but, you see, I did not reckon on every one finding Madame Torni's voice more attractive than their own. It was very undiscerning of me; I am so sorry. As for you, you look quite done up with the heat. Won't you go and study Hamlet while the interval lasts; or have you seen the picture already? No? Then I insist on your seeing it—it is my chief joy for the moment, and I know you love pictures.—Mr. Wentworth, please take Mrs. Arlingham to the Oak Room, and show her 'Hamlet and Ophelia' without further loss of time." And the energetic little lady cleared a path for them in the direction she had been indicating, all-unconscious of Muriel's evident reluctance to carry out her suggestion.

The back of Mr. Orme's house was built out in the form of a quadrangle, of which the music-

room formed one whole side, and the so-called Oak Room another. The way to the latter lay first through that smaller drawing-room to which Wentworth had already proposed Muriel's transferring herself, and then through a conservatory full of ferns and tropical climbers, where the perpetual play of a little fountain kept the air cool and moist. It was an undeniable relief to pass from the over-heated music-room into this soft scented atmosphere, the silence of which was only broken by the rhythmic splash of the tiny spring, as it rose and fell among great clumps of maidenhair.

The Oak Room contained no furniture—nothing at all, indeed, save pictures, and of these not a large collection. Mr. Orme prided himself on buying only masterpieces, whether ancient or modern, and masterpieces are not to be had every day. A long, narrow, picturesque room it was, and, like the conservatory, silent in itself, for it was quite untenanted. But through its three great windows, flung wide open to the warm July night air, came the sound of voices and the ring of laughter from the motley throng in the music-room, as it moved to and fro on the other side of a narrow gulf of darkness.

Mr. Orme's last acquisition, the 'Hamlet and

Ophelia' of a great German artist, occupied the place of honour at the head of the room. Wentworth led his companion before it. "This is what we have come to see," he said. "Do you admire it?"

Muriel studied the picture a little while in silence before she answered, "Very much. I don't care specially for the colouring—it seems to me a little harsh; but the drawing is magnificent, and the whole conception is so noble and so full of poetry. I suppose artists will never be tired of trying to portray that scene."

"I suppose not. I think no artist has given us a perfect realization of the idea as yet, but this man has come very near it. It is a beautiful thing, but intensely sad. Perhaps it could not well be otherwise, seeing it is intended to illustrate the saddest line in Shakespeare. This artist, however, refuses to accept Hamlet's words literally. Do you see that?"

Muriel looked again steadily at the canvas before her. "Yes, I see," she replied. "I prefer that view of the episode, of course, because it happens to be my own. I don't believe Hamlet's 'I did love you *once*' was genuine. It was merely in his part just then."

"Yet Ophelia seems to have accepted it as

genuine, though she at least ought to have known better. She should have been able to see through Hamlet's disguises, if she really loved the man. Hers must have been a poor weakling, uncomprehending affection, after all."

Muriel made no rejoinder. Through the doorway came the music of the little fountain's soft regular plashing; through the window, that of a girl's happy laugh, as she played with the tassel of the music-room blind and talked to her lover. Half drowned in the distance, a peal of distant church bells chimed intermittently, rising and falling with the night breeze.

"If one plays the madman long enough, people refuse to believe in one's sanity even off the stage," Wentworth resumed. "One gets identified with the character altogether—or would certainly do so, if there were not generally one person in the world with whom one can drop the mask. Thank Heaven for that! life would be unbearable else." He spoke abruptly, with his eyes still on the picture.

"Perhaps the better way would be to abjure masking altogether," returned Muriel, trying to continue the discussion in indifferent, philosophic fashion. "If people were less anxious to appear other than they are—greater, cleverer, wittier

better—it strikes me there would be a much larger amount of real happiness in the world.”

“The amount at present existing there would certainly bear adding to. How much happiness worth the name do you suppose the world contains? How many really happy people are there, I wonder, among the crowd yonder?”—signing towards the window.

“They are a tolerably contented-looking set,” Muriel answered in a studiedly matter-of-fact way. “I don’t think you would find many victims to *Weltschmerz* among them.”

“You think so—because you saw them smile pleasantly, and heard them laugh, and exchange compliments, and say brilliant things to one another? Very superficial judgment, Mrs. Arlingham. We will take ourselves for a sample of these happy people. Have we not done all those things this very evening? Could any one have found a flaw in the perfection of *our* masking and mumming during the past hour? Would not the world say that we both have everything the heart of man and woman need desire? Yet are we happy, either of us? You know we are not. We pretend to be so: to the world, to each other, and sometimes even to ourselves—but the whole thing is a ghastly sham.

We are both most unhappy, most miserable, and we both know it. Can a hundred denials of the truth make matters a whit better for either of us ? ”

She at least had not strength for one. And indeed what availed denial of the truth with this man, who read her inmost soul better than she could read it for herself ?

“ You will say that it is better to leave the wretchedness unacknowledged, and that to talk of it only makes things worse. I agree with you in a general way. Only sometimes, when the pain has grown and grown till it has become unendurable, one must needs cry out. There is a limit to endurance.”

Muriel gathered up all her forces for a reply. “ I think you are too morbid,” she said as calmly as she could. “ I agree with the world that Fortune has favoured you in many ways—and me also, for that matter. I cannot consent to be included among the secret misanthropes of your catalogue, I assure you.”

There was a blaze of scorn in Wentworth’s eyes. “ I beg your pardon,” he said coldly. “ I beg your pardon a thousand times ! Of course you have everything to make you happy—why should you not be happy ? Youth, and beauty,

and wealth, and admiration are enough for any woman's happiness, no doubt. Love is a make-weight that can be easily dispensed with, if necessary, without materially altering the balance of the scale. Unfortunately, I am differently constituted—I am not skilful in adjusting things, and I miss the poor make-weight."

Little conventional artifices had ever been but a miserably insufficient barrier with which to oppose Wentworth's deadly earnest—Muriel had known that instinctively once. But she had lived so long now upon conventions, that she fell back upon them in her need as a matter of course. "Hush!" she said, putting up her hand and turning from him to the open window. "Madame Tornè is singing again. What is this?"

Madame Tornè had been singing for some minutes, as it happened. She was in the middle of Tosti's "At Vespers," and on the soft night air came the clear, solemn chant, dirge-like as a requiem for the dead—

"More cold than these has grown your heart,
More cold your hand I used to press;
And never death has such a smart
As your forgetfulness!"

There the singer paused, and Wentworth filled

up the pause. "True," he said softly, as he leant against the frame of the window towards which Muriel had moved impulsively, "there is worse suffering than the suffering of to-night. I knew what it was in its fulness three months ago. Anything rather than that!"

Muriel trembled a little, and a subtle change passed over her face. All unacknowledged to herself, his forgetfulness had been the worst part of her pain; and the certainty that he loved her still brought with it a moment of tumultuous gladness. Wentworth, with his eyes on her face, grasped the meaning of that change well enough.

"It is difficult to tell some gladness from pain," he said in his deep, thrilling voice. "There must always be so much pain for us, every way; but it is not and cannot be all pain to-night. Don't you think, with poor Othello, 'if it were now to die, it were to be most happy'?"

Did any one ever before pray for strength to laugh? Scarcely, perhaps. Yet I think Muriel went near to praying for it at that moment. And she did laugh; although the laugh, when it came, had well-nigh ended in a sob.

"You are full of gloomy fancies to-night, Mr. Wentworth," she said. "That kind of thing is

generally a little infectious, but you go quite too far for me. I really have not the slightest desire to quit this mortal sphere at present."

Her poor little flippant shaft, shot in desperate self-defence, glanced off unheeded. Sensitive as Wentworth usually was to such missiles, this one did not strike out of him even a momentary spark of resentment.

"What use is it to talk like this?" he asked sadly and pitifully. "What possible use—knowing what we both know now? And knowing it, what good shall our parted lives do us? Muriel"—lingering with passionate fondness on the syllables of her name, and leaning suddenly forward to clasp his hand over hers—"Muriel, tell me one thing in truth, though Heaven knows it is an idle question enough! Instead of a hopeless, loveless life—to die so, with your hand in mine, would it not be infinitely better? Would you not be glad—as I should be glad? After all the long bitter past, if there were no more bitter future for us, we might well be content with this one perfect moment!"

The time had come for Muriel to speak; no longer by transparent conventionalities or dignified evasions, but in absolute unshrinking truth; out of the depths of her own storm-tossed but

steadfast spirit, straight to the soul looking at her in its great love and despair out of Paul Wentworth's eyes. She was white as marble, but she no longer trembled as she lifted her eyes to his, and answered, without even attempting to withdraw her hand from the grasp in which he held it, "For this one moment? Yes, perhaps I might almost be glad too—in my madness. But when it was over? Have you thought how it would be with us then, in the presence of God?"

Slowly and silently Wentworth let go her hand. All the passion died out of his face, and over its ashen pallor swept the shadow of a great awe. "It was I who was mad; you must forgive me," he murmured half audibly, with lips that quivered as if from acute physical suffering.

Muriel's strength had been exhausted in that supreme effort, and she knew that her only safety lay in return to the outside world. "I am rather tired," she said, in a way that was half dignified, half childlike, "and I think I would like to go home now. Will you take me to my husband, please?"

Wentworth gave her his arm without a word, and they passed out together. In the neighbouring drawing-room they easily discovered Geoffrey

Arlingham. He was talking eagerly to a group of young men, and he took no notice of his wife's presence until Wentworth, quitting Muriel, went up and summoned him.

"I am so glad to have found you, Jack," Muriel exclaimed, as her husband approached with manifest unwillingness. "I should like to go home now, if you don't mind."

"Why are you in such a desperate hurry?" inquired Mr. Arlingham ungraciously. "We have not been here long."

"The rooms are so hot," Muriel answered gently, "and I have a headache. I should be very glad to get away."

"Oh, in that case, better go by all means," her husband rejoined carelessly, turning to go back to his friends. "I dare say you will be all right when you get out of the heat."

"Are not you coming with me?" she asked hastily, and almost appealingly. She spoke in an undertone, vainly hoping that the words might not reach Wentworth's ear where he stood a little apart from them.

"Oh, I really can't!"—Jack's customary polite formula of refusal when requested to do anything likely to interfere ever so slightly with his personal convenience. "I'm going on to Colonel

Marshall's with those fellows. Mr. Wentworth will see you to the carriage, I've no doubt. Ah, thanks! and good night"—in answer to Wentworth's grave sign of assent.

Wentworth cast a single look of scorn and hatred and unspeakable contempt at Arlingham as he moved away, but when he turned back to Muriel his face had grown perfectly impassive. He would not lay a straw's weight of additional burden upon her, already so heavily oppressed with pain of his creating, and he knew that the cruellest part of the humiliation she had just received at her husband's hands was the fact that he had been a witness to it. He even forced himself to say quietly, "Mr. Arlingham is right: you will be better when you have made your escape from these heated rooms. I will take you to the ante-room, which is cooler, before I order your carriage. We shall find Lady Beatrice on the way."

She assented mechanically; all the force had gone out of her. She felt like a child that has run to its guardian for protection, and finds itself thrust away with contemptuous roughness to face the dangers threatening it alone and unassisted. Jack's harsh words had hurt her as a scornful blow might have hurt such a child.

"Sit down," said Wentworth in his calm, authoritative way, when they had reached the ante-room, and he had found a chair for her near the open door, half in the shadow of the *portière*. "I will fetch your wraps—give me the number—and no one will disturb you here."

No one disturbed her, as he said; she was left in peace and silence till he came back again, with her white cloak hanging on his arm, and that curious look of self-repression on his pale, set face. Muriel stood up, and he put the cloak round her shoulders.

"Your carriage has been called," he said; "it must be there by this time, I think. Will you go down now?"

She turned towards the staircase. A sudden gust of wind from the open hall door caught her unfastened cloak and blew it apart; Wentworth put out his hand as if to gather it round her more closely, and then suddenly drew it back again. "It is quite chilly now—a breeze has sprung up," he said in a stifled voice. "Fasten that up before you go."

She obeyed him as simply as if she had been a child. But though her hands were unsteady at the work, he did not offer to help her; and it

was not till he had put her safely into the carriage that he spoke again.

“Good night—and I suppose also, good-bye. You leave town to-morrow, I think?”

“Yes, to-morrow.”

His hand just touched hers for a moment. “The change will be good for you, no doubt; it is time for every one to leave London who can do so. Good-bye.”

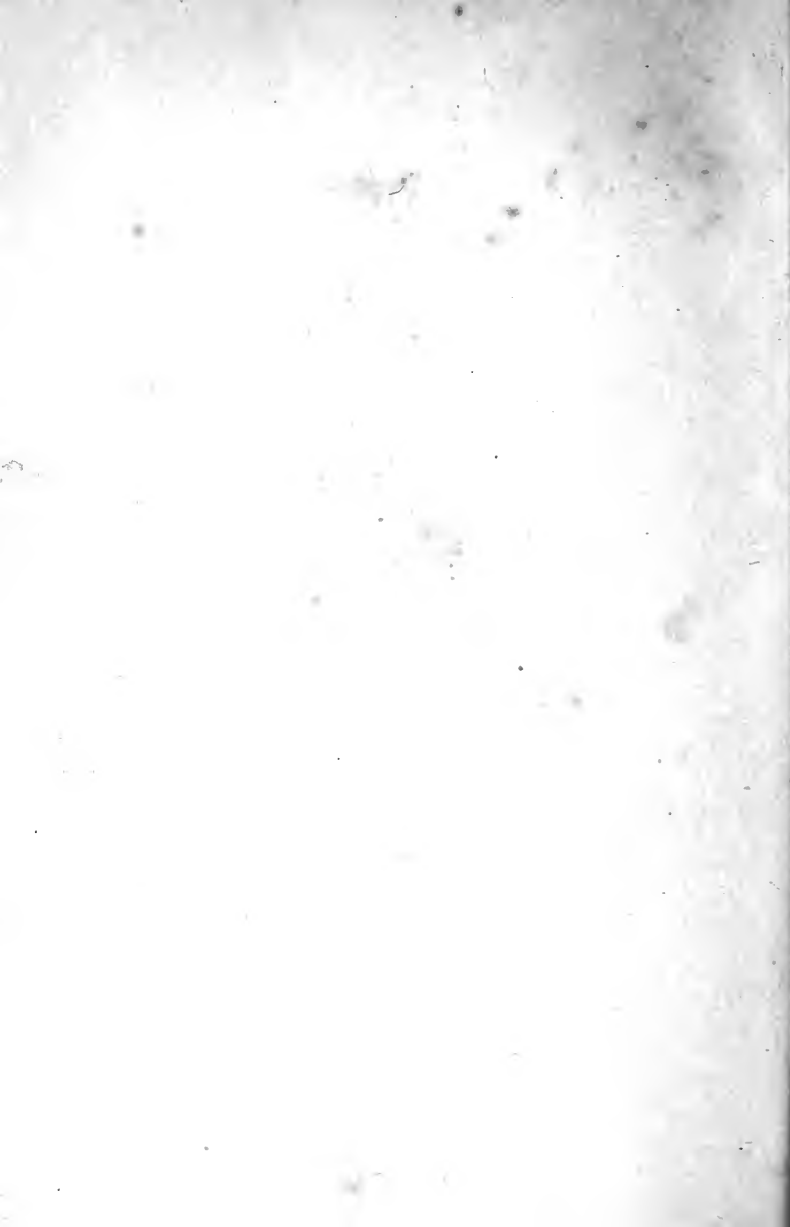
END OF VOL. II.





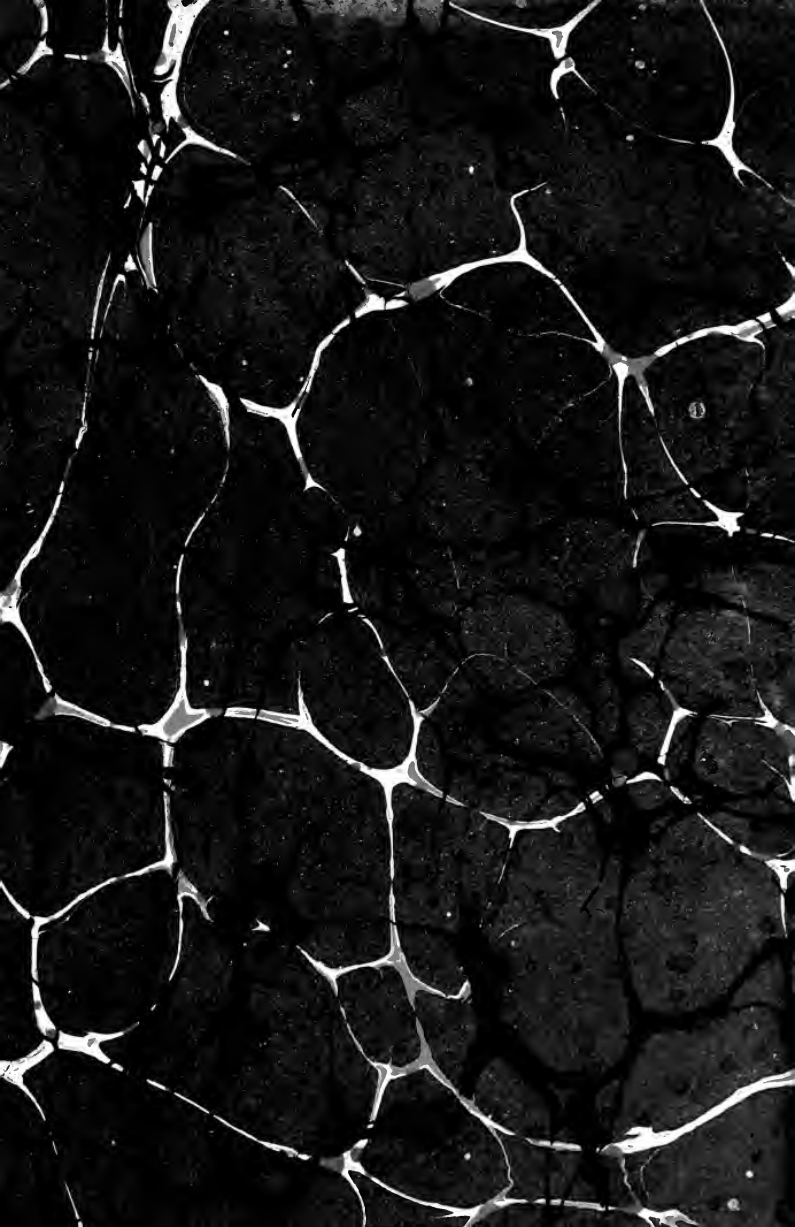












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